


CONSCIENCE OF THE RACE

INDIA'S OFFBEAT CINEMA

Bibekananda Ray





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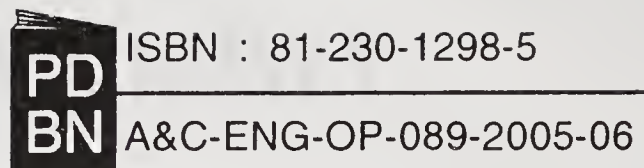


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TO THE MEMORY OF MY PARENTS

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|------------|
| <i>Foreword</i> | <i>vii</i> |
| <i>Preface</i> | <i>xi</i> |
| I. Introduction | 1 |
| II. Shadows Before Substance | 8 |
| III. Inspiration behind Offbeat Cinema | 11 |
| IV. <i>Pather Panchali</i> : The Benchmark Film | 14 |
| V. Satyajit Ray nourishes the Genre | 18 |
| VI. Archetypal Cinema : Ritwik Ghatak | 35 |
| VII. Marxist Ethos and Beyond: Mrinal Sen | 43 |
| VIII. Ripples before the 'Wave' | 52 |
| IX. <i>Bhuban Shome</i> raises A 'Wave' | 57 |
| X. Ankur crests 'Wave' in Hindi | 59 |
| XI. Offbeat in Bengali Cinema | 83 |
| XII. <i>Samskara</i> ushers Offbeat in South | 95 |
| XIII. Adoor and Aravindan lead in Kerala | 105 |
| XIV. Offbeat in Tamil and Telugu Cinemas | 119 |
| XV. Offbeat in Other Cinemas | 128 |
| XVI. Feminist and other Themes | 145 |
| XVII. The Third Generation | 151 |
| XVIII. Indian Filmmakers in the West | 177 |
| XIX. Documentary and Short Films | 185 |
| XX. Before the Camera | 201 |
| XXI. Behind the Camera | 218 |
| XXII. Treatment of Music and Dance | 225 |
| XXIII. Government Intervention | 231 |
| XXIV. Offbeat Cinema in Cold Print | 249 |
| XXV. Window on the World | 258 |
| XXVI. Initiatives for Better Cinema | 262 |
| XXVII. Future of Offbeat Cinema | 269 |

FOREWORD

The writing of any form of history is subject to many hazards in India. The most basic of them is the traditional contempt of accuracy of fact and the glorification of myth making. With the exception of Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* (11th century), there is virtually no writing in Sanskrit which can be described properly as history; our literature overflows with para-history in the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana* and the 18 *Puranas* and the progeny spawned by them in late medieval times. The predominance of para-history over history served the very material purpose of the manipulation of texts in order to bend the past to the exigencies of the present. Thus the epics and the *Puranas* were both originally told by the *Sutas*, or the king's retainers, who kept him company in peace and drove his chariot in war. In the caste hierarchy, they were lower than the Brahmins; thus, the latter had no difficulty in dispossessing them of any chronicle that became overly popular and reworking it to suit their own interest. The anonymity of the writer of the chronicles only helped the process. The *Mahabharata* grew from 24 thousand *shlokas* in the original long poem, called *Jaya* to 100 thousand over a period of eight hundred years (c. 400 B.C.–c. 400 A.D.), providing ample scope to the Brahmins to interpolate to the extent that the interpolated text grew to four times the size of the original. Some of it resulted from the addition of tales, gaining currency later on and deemed suitable for accession into the vast compilation that the epic turned into but there are others, which clearly preached the casteist ideology of the later-day authors. Shocking as it may seem to Hindu zealots, respect for exact historical dating of events was alien to the Hindu temperament and came into currency only with the advent of the Muslims via the scientific penchant of the Arab civilization c. 9th to c. 15th century.

This traditional difficulty is compounded in the field of the cinema by the absence of archives. Fire hazards in the inflammable medium of cellulose nitrate rolls were not the sole reason for creating the desert of historical resources in the silent period. There was, in addition, the filmmaker's contempt for his own creation as ephemera, devised solely for the purpose of making money. This is apparent from the fact that even after cinema changed to the non-inflammable medium of cellulose acetate in the 1950's, neither the film industry nor individual film producers rushed to convert the old stock to the new and to conserve their products for posterity. That had to await governmental intervention in the form of the National Film Archives of India, which made it possible to see a fair number of early talkies under one roof, for the first time. J.B.H.Wadia was possibly the only one among the individual producers to preserve most of his works in fair condition over his long career in cinema.

As if this ahistoricity were not enough, regional, racial and linguistic chauvinism added their own distorting mirrors to confuse the picture. Bengalis pressed the claims of

Hiralal Sen, trying to establish him as the real father of Indian cinema on the strength of contemporary reports and without one foot of surviving film. Maharashtrians advanced the cause of Harishchandra Bhatwadekar (*Sawe Dada*) with equal enthusiasm and with equally secondary evidence. Indeed, the primacy of Phalke would perhaps have been challenged more vigorously by the camp followers of Tornay who made the full-length fictional film, *Pundalik* fully a year before *Harishchandra*, if both had not been from Maharashtra.

Where Phalke remained memorable and nationalistic was in his pronounced zeal in proving that whatever India's then rulers, the British, or let us say the Western man with his sense of superior knowledge since the European Renaissance could do, we could do as well, if not better. In doing so, he also managed to give the films a cultural specificity, which has protected them from all invasions of foreign cinema, however powerful. There are very few countries today, which are independent and self-sufficient in cinema and even its variants on the small screen, as India. Phalke's indigenisation of the cinema was peculiarly Indian in the way he established the power of myth over the power of fact, reinforcing India's traditional instruments for continuing its caste-ridden, belief-led reliance on a hierarchy of privilege and in sanctifying the role of *Kshatriya* violence in upholding the brahminical social order. Resistance to social change was thereby built into the body of Indian cinema and eventually overcame the urges towards social realism, which manifested in the 1930's and continued into the 1950s. This marginalized the realist trend into the small space, created by a minority cinema of the serious creative filmmaking, primarily concerned with the universal language of cinema, rather than its Indian dialect, in its expression of art and a social conscience. This happened especially after Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955) and the movement that came up in its wake with the support of the Government and the intelligentsia. The middle ground between personal and commercial cinema that had been created in the 1950s by Guru Dutt, Raj Kapoor, Shantaram, Mehboob and Bimal Roy, slowly eroded and gave way to the actual polarity, however artificial it may seem, between commercial and art cinema.

In the process of filmmaking, there has been an integrative, connective tendency, which is not present in the product. People of all regions, faiths, castes, languages and physiognomies have worked happily together in Bollywood for decades together in a model of harmony. The language of the films also bears testimony to this unifying principle in evolving a widely comprehensible Hindustani, made up of Hindi dialectal words, Urdu and smaller borrowings from other languages, reflecting the diversity of India, and bypassing the oppressive Sanskritization of the official language whose failure on the ground has been evident for decades. Hindi cinema is acceptable through the length and breadth of the country but the opposition to the imposition of *shudh* Hindi remains unabated.

The other regional cinemas have been too small to hold their own against the forces of homogenisation. Bengal, at one time, dominated the Hindi cinema by dint of its cultural power derived from nearness to the British and early access to Western style education. But as time wore on, Mumbai's superior commercial success overpowered the cultural

clout of Bengali cinema, divesting it first of its all-India role in the New Theatres period, then of distinguishing traits of its practitioners in Mumbai, decimating the so-called 'Middle Cinema' and finally capturing the Bengali audience for the Hindi product. State help for the survival of culture-specific cinema has been either short-lived, or inadequate, or both.

In two States of the South- Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh- the serious creative cinema was hardly permitted to take its birth. NTR proclaimed himself against it in an interview. MGR is not known to have made any overt statements to that effect but his actions, such as the pattern of entertainment tax he established, were clearly calculated to prevent any non-conformist cinema from taking root. In Tamil Nadu, it is hardly possible to succeed in politics without succeeding in the cinema. No wonder, the State leaders have never been anxious to allow any other kind of cinema to grow, not to speak of prospering. Kerala, with the ideological values projected by its strong Marxist [ethos] had the realist cinema carve out a niche for itself, catering to sections of the intelligentsia. Karnataka has maintained more of a middle-of-the-road position, neither precluding nor fostering, except for a while in the 1970's, a cinema that addressed social reality directly, and not through the prism of unmediated myths. Pockets of resistance remain in Manipur, in Assam, in Orissa but mopping-up operations are in force and the chariot of Hindi film is not likely to be held up for long. In the Northeast, the Hindi cinema has become a conduit for a Westernised homogenisation, which belies slogans of cultural separatism.

Thus, a highly culture-specific standard product of Indian cinema, which speaks, like the Beijing Opera films, a dialect that those versed in the universal language of world cinema can barely decode, serves to obliterate cultural specificities within the country. Is acceptability in the Third World over the past decades since Independence is also fast eroding with the growth of national cinemas in countries of Southeast Asia and sections of Africa? By contrast, Japanese cinema, despite its deeply national character, has almost always adopted cinematic idioms that are admissible to the universal language of cinema. An outstanding example of this is in the works of Ozu, which have found ready acceptance with cinematically literate audiences everywhere, despite their inalienably Japanese character.

A similar example can also be seen in the cinema of Satyajit Ray, despite its obvious debt to Hollywood's linear narrative methods. The space for contemplation, which his films provide within the Hollywood editing pattern and the slow pace of their movement, germane to the traditional rhythm of life in India, mark them out so effectively as almost to make this style *sui generis*. Its elements are drawn from French, Russian and Italian cinema of certain periods, besides Hollywood but the end result bears the unique stamp of Ray. Its Indianness is entirely in the mind that informs it; Ray owes little or no debt to his forerunners in Indian cinema and stands in outstanding contrast to Phalke.

Very little of this underlying pattern of Indian cinema has been explored in extant historical literature. Pioneering work has been done by Feroze Rangoonwala, B.D.Garga, Barnowe and Krishnaswamy but no comprehensive work has yet emerged in the field of historical analysis, supported by holistic reasoning composed of sociological, religious,

cultural and aesthetic inputs, particularly those drawn from Indian tradition. Much of the advanced discussion of cinema is predicated upon definitions and methods developed within Western social and aesthetic compulsions, often assumed to be *ipso facto* universal in their applicability. Thus, terms like humanism, or values like these underlying myths, are viewed predominantly through the Western experience extrapolated to the world. Thus, humanism is defined in the West as a post-Renaissance doctrine that places man at the centre of the universal order and puts him in a driver's seat. In Indian tradition, much predating the European Renaissance, it derives largely from Buddhism and the cultivation of non-violence as well as the Vedantic concept of man as a speck of dust caught in the meshes of a vast cosmic cycle. Similarly, myths provide the leavening even to humanist-rationalist Rabindranath Tagore many of whose songs cannot even be understood without a sense of belonging to the *Vaishnava* tradition. Satyajit Ray's films similarly carry unmistakable traces of Hindu myths of Shiva and Krishna, which remain unsung; because he did not consciously trumpet them but were simply part of the cultural legacy, he inherited.

However, the exploration of the cinematic experience in India and the formulation of its bases, its underlying motivations, are predicated, first and foremost, upon a reliable assembly of facts in an orderly fashion, free from the traditional apathy towards historicity and the cultural chauvinism, which continue to plague historical studies in India to this day, sometimes with a renewed vigour.

Chidananda Dasgupta

Santiniketan

PREFACE

“The image of the past is the historian’s contribution to the future”
—*Romila Thapar*

Cinema arrived in India from France on 7th July 1896 when in Mumbai’s Watson Hotel (now Army & Navy Building, near present-day *Kala Ghoda* in Esplanade area), six short silent movie strips, made by Lumiere brothers of Paris, were shown to the local elite. Three years later, in 1899, a still photographer of Mumbai, Harishchandra Sakharam Bhatwadekar (later known as *Sawe Dada*) shot a movie strip in 1899 ; the first ‘wholly Indian’ silent feature film, *Raja Harishchandra* came to be made, 14 years thereafter, in 1913, by another Marathi D G Phalke. In nine decades thereafter, some 33 thousand films, long and short together and including over 1300 silent, have been released. In 1971, India with 431 feature films made that year, overtook Japan to become the world’s largest film-producing country. Annual production has since doubled, even more in some years, taking India further ahead of major filmmaking countries. Joined together, India’s movie films can twice girdle the earth’s circumference at the Equator.

In more than a century, Indian cinema has grown and diversified enormously. One wishes, this exponential growth was reflected in quality too. The world acclaimed films made by Satyajit Ray and some of his offbeat successors but the much larger, mainstream cinema remain the favourite of common cine-goers, not only in India but in many other Asian and some African countries too. Western people (except Asians abroad) did not take much note of it till recently, when some Hindi mainstream films- some of them shot, premiered and distributed abroad- ran well in European cities. In Pakistan, Indian films are banned but secretly sell and circulate in cities in pirated DVD, VCD and video cassettes. As Nirad C Chaudhury once observed, cinema has become the ‘most widely appreciated and easily understood cultural expression in India’. The film industry in six cities- Chennai, Kolkata, Mumbai, Bangalore, Hyderabad and Thiruvananthapuram- thrives on the massive patronage of popular cinema, which is as far removed from the offbeat genre as Pushpin is from poetry.

In writing this book, no ideological or sociological framework has been postulated to explain facets of Indian cinema- offbeat or mainstream because that would have been like the proverbial Procrustean bed, suiting facts to theory. As journalists say, “Facts are sacred; comments free.” As history is not read like a novel, the book has been packed with information, which might have made it, in places, mere assemblage and a catalogue of facts.

The title of the book is taken from a monologue of the young artist in James Joyce’s novel, *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). It implies that the offbeat genre, more than the mainstream, truly reflects the conscience of the Indian people. The latter does not lack in conscience but its reflection is often so phoney that it can hardly be

called 'the conscience of the race'. Offbeat films may not interest many people for their stark realism and disturbing themes but their makers never fail to treat them conscientiously.

The terms- 'offbeat' and 'mainstream'- have been used rather loosely, because the division is somewhat arbitrary, created by the media and did not exist before 1950s. A trend is emerging of diluting offbeat syndromes with entertainment values of the mainstream even by noted directors, like Shyam Benegal, Govind Nihalani and Prakash Jha. Similarly, many mainstream films like *Lagaan* (2001) are tending to offbeat, raising hope that someday, the twain will meet, erasing the division.

Sources

Materials of this book came from many sources- some direct, some indirect. The direct sources are the legion of mainstream films, seen from childhood and from early youth, the films of Satyajit Ray (some, many times over), Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen and other offbeat directors of their and subsequent generations in many languages. Among indirect sources are newspaper reports, reviews, supplements, magazine articles, publications of the Film Festival Directorate, many film histories, notably *Indian Film* by Erik Barnowe and S. Krishnaswamy, *The Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* by Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, *Indian Cinema* by Feroze Rangoonwala, *The New Indian Cinema* by Aruna Vasudev and lately, *The Cinemas of India* by Yves Thoraval. Interviews with a host of film writers, makers, producers and technicians also yielded a lot of information and insight.

Acknowledgements

I benefitted from discussions with Chidananda Dasgupta (who graciously wrote a Foreword too for the whole of the Indian cinema and therefore, had to be abridged), Derek Malcolm of *The Guardian* (during his visits to Delhi festivals), Feroze Rangoonwala and Randor Guy- film writers in Mumbai and Chennai respectively. Studies in the National Film Archive of India at Pune yielded significant material.

I am beholden to the Publications Division for assigning me to write this book. Prof. Barnik Roy, a friend and editor of *La Poesie*, constantly encouraged me to complete the manuscript and enquired about its fate. The Directorates of Advertising and Visual Publicity, Photo Division, Directorate of Film Festivals, all under the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, Nema Ghosh, Satyajit Ray's celebrity still photographer, provided most of the stills and other photos.

The years, given after the titles of films, are generally of their censor certification but for most of them could be of releases also. To keep the manuscript within the allotted number of pages, some more data and visuals about films and filmmakers had to be sacrificed, which some day may find place in a bigger book. In spite of care and pains taken, there could still be many errors and omissions of facts. To an author, a second edition is a happy event, because it gives an opportunity to remove errors and update the text. I shall be grateful if readers point them out through letters to the publisher, and / or by e-mail to the author (bray2@rediffmail.com) .

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I. Introduction

“...*The Indian filmmaker must turn to life and reality and his ideal should be de Sica, not de Mille.*”
—*Satyajit Ray*

There are many ways of introducing India's offbeat cinema, depending on whom it is introduced to. To foreigners, it has to be introduced differently than to our own people. Interpretations can also be diverse. Many people see it as an aberration from the more voluminous mainstream cinema but few will deny, as this author believes, that it is a vehicle of truer creative self-expression, reflecting the 'conscience of the race'.

Diversity is the hallmark of Indian cinema. Although many regional cinemas have been influenced (if not stifled too) by the mainstream Hindi cinema, their milieus are diverse. Many regional mainstream cinemas are using the ingredients of successful Hindi blockbusters, which present, as Satyajit Ray put it, 'a synthetic, non-existent society'. This siren attraction works for only a handful of producers who can bear the enormous cost of making them, which ordinary regional producers cannot afford.

The first Indian realist film- the label was then unknown- is *Savkari Pash* (aka 'An Indian Shylock') made by Baburao Painter for Maharashtra Film Company, Kolhapur and released in 1925. It was a silent film, comparable to Erich Von Stroheim's *Greed* (1924), on the stark theme of indebtedness of Maratha peasants to cruel usurers; so popular it became that it was remade by Painter as a talkie in 1936. V Shantaram, acting and directing from the Silent Era, made some realistic films, e.g. *Duniya Naa Mane* (1937) and *Dahej* (1950)- the first on a young girl forced to marry an old widower and and the second on dowry in marriage- but made different films too. The first offbeat film, true to the European syndrome, was Nemai Ghosh's *Chhinnamul* (1950) and Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zameen* (1953). However, the first offbeat film to become a global rave and a kind of benchmark for the genre is Satyajit Ray's debut in 1955, *Pather Panchali*. In his 34 long and short features as well as five documentaries Ray proved himself to be its most steadfast and renowned contributor. The ripples, formed by *Pather Panchali*, swelled virtually to a wave in just 15 years, after the unexpected box-office success of Mrinal Sen's *Bhuban Shome* and poignant realism of Mani Kaul's *Uski Roti*, both in 1969.

The inspiration behind the offbeat genre came from the 'New Wave' cinema of Europe. Bimal Roy's inspiration for *Do Bigha Zameen* came from some Italian, French and Japanese neo-realist films that he saw in the 1st International Film Festival in Kolkata in 1952. Satyajit Ray was inspired by De Sica's *Bicycle Thief*. Films before *Pather Panchali* were not unrealistic but what made Satyajit Ray an exception was his resolve,

evident in every film thereafter, not to dilute realism with extraneous ingredients of songs, dances or burlesque which mark and mar many mainstream films. Most other offbeat filmmakers too tread his path, with uneven talent and success but the viewers of their films are a minority. A rough estimate has it that only about three per cent of films, released every year, are 'offbeat'; the rest are the so-called 'middle' or 'mainstream' cinema, mostly of the entertaining kind, or just trash.

The offbeat genre turned upside down certain conventions, common in the mainstream cinema. As many silent feature films took off from popular plays, stage conventions persisted in cinema for a long time. Acting was theatrical- loud and wordy; characters entered and went out from the focus field, as in a stage-play. Even the songs and dances, as Satyajit Ray said, are 'a legacy of the theatrical-operatic tradition'. Offbeat directors 'de-dramatised' cine-acting. In *Nayak* (1966), Ray devoted two sequences to underline the difference between cinematic and stage acting by their advocates. In an interview to Sharmila Tagore for a video news-magazine, shortly before his death, he spoke of precision in cinematic acting, as opposed to exaggeration in theatrical, how "slight excess before the camera could ruin a scene". Theatrical conventions persist in many regional cinemas, burdened with 'words, words, words'- a legacy from folk plays- and ceaseless drone on the soundtrack.

Major regional cinemas have, since 1970s, have developed an offbeat- genre as a kind of protest to generally uncinematic mainstream. As the French historian of Indian cinema (*The Cinemas of India*, 2000) says, "New Cinema is a direct reaction to the total absence of 'roots'- not to speak of an aesthetic vacuum- which characterised commercial Hindi cinema of the 1960s and '70s". However, most artistes and technicians work in both without any qualm, because they cannot survive on the offbeat genre alone, except Ray's team in his early films, who waited for his next film. Inevitably, mainstream films are many more in number and bring more money to producers. Because of this, some offbeat directors have defected to the mainstream; it is rarely the other way about. G.V. Iyer of Kannada cinema is perhaps a solitary exception.

Many offbeat filmmakers evince originality in theme and treatment but few are alike. There is no common creed or ethos except their urge to make their films reflect reality, unspoilt by inroads of extraneous entertaining values. Some films convey anger and *angst*, conspicuously Mrinal Sen's and Govind Nihalani's, against the social, economic and political order; others fume at obscurantism, caste barriers, religious bigotry and oppression of women and other weaker people.

Satyajit Ray used the word 'offbeat' to describe his kind of cinema. In an article in 1965, he wrote: "I knew, what I was going to do was offbeat". In Italy and France, where this kind of cinema first emerged during the Second World War, it earned the rubrics- 'Neo-Realist', *Auteur* ('author') and *Nouvelle Vague* ('New Wave'). When the genre started in India with Ray's *Pather Panchali* in 1955, it began to be called 'art' or parallel cinema, used extensively from the 1970s when a kind of 'wave' of such films rose in Hindi, Bengali and Malayalam. However, 'offbeat' is a better rubric, because not

all such films were artistic and the genre never ran parallel to the more popular mainstream, because offbeat films were and continue to be fewer.

A phenomenon of the 1940s, which contributed to the rise of the offbeat genre, was the retreat of the story from cinema, like that of poetry with the advance of civilization. Feature films with thin, or practically no, storylines but replete with entertaining ingredients like songs, dances and fights, became a new craze after the Second World War. Contractors, flush with funds, earned from War supplies and black marketing, invested in filmmaking for big profit. They popularised a form of mindless and debasing entertainment, having no desire or ability of the urban middle class, who were making films before, to protect or promote culture. B N Reddy was so distressed by this trend in Telugu cinema that he gave up filmmaking in the prime of his career. Bimal Roy in Mumbai, equally disgusted, tried to check this trend, unsuccessfully.

Offbeat cinema was, in a sense ‘a return to the story’. Writing on the so-called Indian New Wave in 1971, Satyajit Ray wrote:

“Considering its lusty existence for well over two thousand years, it seems naive to believe that the last ten years or so have somehow seen the demise of the story.... The love of narrative, in no matter what disguised form, is too deeply ingrained in the human species. ... By discarding the story altogether, one would be destroying the very basis of a film that a lot of people are expected to see and like. ”

The story thinned in some offbeat films too but for a different reason. Some *avant-garde* European filmmakers were discarding it in the 1960s; this influenced a few of the first and second generation offbeat directors in India. Mrinal Sen came under the influence of two *avant-garde* filmmakers of France- Jean Luc Goddard and Francois Truffeaut- and emulating them, was “irresistibly drawn towards a non-narrative form and, in the process, trying to de-emphasize plot and incident” to lend to his films a ‘contemporary idiom’. “I do not any longer want to see my film being controlled by a thoroughly calculated and thus fully developed story”. However, box-office failures of many of these films made him return to the narrative in films.

Adoor Gopalakrishnan does not think that the story is disappearing from feature films; only its concept is changing. He told this author on 30 January 2001:

“There is no need for cinema to be an offshoot of literature; in fact, it should ideally free itself from literature and the stage. Means of expression in cinema and literature (also stage) are different. In a true work of cinema, the story could be secondary- just an excuse. The story could just be the seed of an idea that the filmmaker wants to convey.”

Themes, Conventions & Influences

Although there are a wide variety of themes in offbeat films, some of them appear to be favourite and recurrent; certain trends and tendencies can also be noted. As per Zavattini’s prescription, most of them deal with the poorer, weaker and the under-

privileged people and their problems in an unequal inequitable society. Regional ethos marks many of these but few reach out to a truly national ethos, or depict universal situations. However, their regionalism subsumes some common concerns, like the exposure of Machiavellian politics (Mrinal Sen, Shyam Benegal, Buddhadev Dasgupta, Gautam Ghosh, Utpalendu Chakravorti, Govind Nihalani, Prakash Jha, Ramesh Sharma), poverty and exploitation (Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak, Utpalendu Chakravorti, Shyam Benegal, Buddhadev Dasgupta, Gautam Ghosh), class and caste conflicts (Mrinal Sen, Shyam Benegal, Prakash Jha, Utpalendu Chakravorti) etc.

Another recurrent theme is feminism in various forms, like problems of widows, women's right to work outside home and to love and live with men of their choice (sometimes, other than husbands). A few instances of the latter - the most noted- are Ray's *Charulata* and *Ghare Baire*, Aparna Sen's *Paroma*, Dr. B N Saikia's *Agnisnaan* and *Kolahal* and Kalpana Lajmi's *Ek Pal*. Plight of young widows was the theme of Girish Kasaravalli's *Ghata Shraddha* (1977), Prema Karanth's *Phaniyamma* (1982), Rituparno Ghosh's *Chokher Baali* (2003) and a host of other films. S R Puttana Kanagal dealt with male oppression of women in *Sherapanjara* (1972). A husband's infidelity to wife is the theme of Dr. Jabbar Patel's *Umbartha*. Poverty and misery continue to interest younger filmmakers. Films like *Paar* (Gautam Ghosh), *Damul* (Prakash Jha), *Deb Shishu* (Utpalendu Chakrabarti), *Shodh* (Biplab Ray Chowdhury), *Uski Roti* (Mani Kaul), *Aakrosh* (Govind Nihalani) and *Chakra* (Rabindra Dharmaraja) deal with one or other aspect of this ubiquitous Indian reality.

Many offbeat films have been made on social transition from agriculture to industry, exploitation and oppression of peasants by feudal lords, despite abolition of the *zamindari* ('intermediary') system and drastic land reforms after Independence in certain States, notably West Bengal and Kerala, benefitting the landless. Notable among filmmakers on these themes are Adoor Gopalakrishnan (*Elippathayam*), Gautam Ghosh (*Dakhal*), Prakash Jha (*Damul*) and Kumar Shahani (*Maya Darpan*). Although social disparity and so-called class strife is on the rise, even among the very rich (Shyam Benegal's *Kalyug*) and the under-privileged (*Chakra* by Rabindra Dharmaraja, *Thaneer Thaneer* by K Balachander), the emphasis is on the phenomenon in the rural or semi-urban milieu.

Philosophical and moral issues are also not alien to the genre. Aravindan's *Chidambaram* (1985) dealt with sin and retribution, Adoor's *Mukha Mukham* (1984) with political morality and Buddhadev Dasgupta's *Dooratwa* with women's chastity. Unrest in campus to an unbelievable extent was the theme of Ketan Mehta's *Holi* (1984); corruption in high places was analysed in Ramesh Sharma's *New Delhi Times* (1985).

These concerns are consistent with the offbeat ethos, all over the world; these are the expressions of the 'conscience of the race'. However, a humourless obsession with these and their often-morbid treatment tend to blunt the aesthetic edge of the films and repulse common viewers. Realism does not necessarily create *rasa* of Sanskrit aesthetics, or aesthetic delight. It does not need to be overstated that offbeat filmmakers are imbued

with much deeper social awareness than makers of popular films. They tilt, more convincingly, at the Government, or the so-called Establishment, although without State institutional grants and loans, the genre would have withered long ago. Even when the films have been openly critical of the government or the politicians who head or run it, governments have awarded them at home and sent them for competition to foreign festivals. This has not happened to many such cinemas in other countries.

Influence on Politics, Society & Culture

Nirad C Chaudhury once observed: “If I am asked, what human activity is most widely appreciated and easily understood as cultural expression in India today, I would not have a moment’s hesitation in replying, it is cinema.” Cinema’s influence on politics has been almost as much as that of politics on cinema. Mrinal Sen treated political themes conspicuously in many of his films; Satyajit Ray less so in a fewer films, like *Jana Aranya* and *Hirak Rajar Deshe*. So did Ritwik Ghatak (notably in his penultimate *Jukti, Takko Aar Gappa*), John Abraham (*Amma Ariyan*) and a host of his contemporaries in Malayalam cinema, Ramesh Sharma (*New Delhi Times*), Govind Nihalani (*Ardh Satya*) and Prakash Jha (*Damul*, *Mrityudanda* and *Gangajal*). On the whole, politics and cinema remained apart in other regional cinemas, and as filmmakers began relying on government concessions, subsidies and other forms of patronage, the trend appeared to subside by the mid-1990s.

The offbeat cinema’s influence on other arts and what is meant by ‘culture’ has been deeper and wider than that on politics. From the silent days, cinema has been influencing the people’s lives in various ways. The young people, both boys and girls, ape cine stars in dress. In Bengal, a type of blouse (introduced by Rabindranath Tagore’s sister-in-law, Gyanadanandini Devi), which Kanan Devi wore in her early films, e.g. *Mukti*, became a fashion among women. Uttam Kumar’s hair-cut and back-brushed mane were the fad, just as Amitabh Bachchan’s unbuttoned shirt and ‘macho’ jeans were copied by school and college-going boys in the 1970s. Pramathesh Barua’s Bengali, and Bimal Roy’s Hindi, *Devdas* (1935 & 1955) made many young men mull over unrequited love, take to a bohemian life and liquor in a suicidal mania. In the virtual explosion of cinema on television and through DVD and VCD, a film’s impact has become transitory but in my boyhood, I used to ruminate over and remain under the spell of a good film for days.

Films transform life too. After seeing Ray’s *Kanchanjungha* (1962), a young man wrote to the editor of a Kolkata daily that like the ‘suitor’ in the film, he had ‘freed’ a girl who valued love more than security in marriage. Prime Minister P V Narashimha Rao, while laying the foundation for Satyajit Ray Film & Television Institute in Kolkata 1994 observed that Devaki Bose’s *Chandidas* (1932) led him to read the Vaishnava poet. Richard Attenborough’s *Gandhi* (1982) familiarised the Mahatma to millions of people, all over the world. Film songs popularized Tagore’s in Bengal and of other poets and lyricists in other languages too, faster than their books did. Many poets, who would have otherwise remained unknown or perished in penury, earned fame and fortune by writing

lyrics for films. So did many writers who wrote songs and stories for films, like Prem Chand in Hindi and Premendra Mitra in Bengali.

Many offbeat films have been period pieces too. Satyajit Ray's *Shatranj ke Khiladi* (1977), Ketan Mehta's *Mirch Masala* (1986), about a *Subedar*'s lust for a village belle in Gujarati village in the 19th century and Pradeep Kishen's *Massey Saheb* on a young Indian clerk's misplaced faith in a British District Collector in the 1930s, are moving films in this genre. Girish Karnad's *Utsav* (1984) recreated the amours of the elite and the wayward in an Indian city in the fourth century, adapting the Sanskrit classic, *Mrichhakatikam*.

Filmmaker and writer, Chidananda Dasgupta thinks, the offbeat cinema is much truer to the Indian Constitution than the mainstream:

"The Constitution says, men and women are equal; the privately-owned popular cinema says, they are not. The (mostly) State-sponsored 'art' cinema says that they are. The popular cinema despises the law, making its heroes take it into their hands; the art cinema berates the establishment for not giving the commoner an equal access to the law. One is the voice of the grassroots, scared by the new forces changing the traditional balance of power among diverse groups; the other is the voice of the elite, trying to lead the country towards change."

Talents in filmmaking have veered more to the offbeat than to the mainstream. Satyajit Ray is called a genius and Bengalees regard him as 'next to Rabindranath Tagore' among modern cultural icons. Cinematographers like Subrata Mitra and composers like Ravi Shankar stuck mainly to the offbeat, when they would have earned much more in the mainstream which would not have given them as much scope to use their creativity. V S Naipaul once said, in an interview to *Newsweek* in 1998,

"I think, it might well be that a lot of talent of this [20th] century has gone into filmmaking. What has been achieved by filmmakers is quite dazzling when compared to what has been done in the novel."

Everyday thousands of people see films in some 13,000 cinema-halls and many thousands more on television and video. On the TV, not only films but also film-related programmes are a craze. Apart from reviews of new films in Friday newspapers, film news and gossip feature in big and small newspapers, virtually every day. This appetite for films on the television has benefitted the offbeat genre too. Offbeat and minor mainstream films, which do not easily find commercial outlet in halls, get it on Doordarshan.

Hollywood has such an unshakeable hold on the producers and filmmakers in the mainstream that they take pride in calling the film industry in Mumbai as 'Bollywood'. Many themes and conventions of mainstream cinema are copied from Hollywood. It is in this context that the French maestro, Jean Renoir told young Ray in 1948 that India could make 'great films' if it could shake Hollywood out of the system. This 'shake-out' has happened considerably in the offbeat cinema but not in the mainstream.

Satyajit Ray who is truly the *guru* of India's offbeat cinema, did not lose hope about its future, nor do his able successors, like Adoor Gopalakrishnan. Much before he made any film, Ray diagnosed the ills of the Indian cinema in an article, "What is wrong with Indian film?" in *The Statesman*, Kolkata on 2nd October 1948:

"What the Indian cinema needs today is not more gloss but more imagination, more integrity and a more intelligent appreciation of the limitations of the medium.... What our cinema needs above everything else is a style, an idiom, a sort of iconography of cinema, which would be uniquely and recognisably Indian.... It is only in a drastic simplification of style and content that hope for the Indian cinema resides... The raw material of cinema is life itself. It is incredible that a country, which has inspired so much painting and music and poetry, should fail to move the filmmaker. He has only to keep his eyes open, and his ears. Let him do so."

In spite of what he and others have achieved in nearly half a century since *Pather Panchali* (1955), his prescription has remained valid. Like Mrinal Sen, he believed, a 'perceptive' minority will always see offbeat films.

"They are all around us, within easy reach and in enough numbers to make a two-lakh proposition pay, waiting for the right kind of offbeat movie to turn up." (*An Indian New Wave*, 1971).

II. Shadows Before Substance

“Human kind cannot bear very much reality.”

—T S Eliot

In post-war Europe, realism was in the air in its film cities, particularly in Italy and France. Bright young men bandied theories of cinematic realism and made a new kind of films, departing from Hollywood tradition. These films were shown in Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai soon after their releases in Europe and influenced young aspirants. For example, Bimal Roy, once an ace cinematographer with the New Theatres, who made Bengali films in Kolkata too, was so impressed by some Italian, French and Japanese neo-realist films in the 1st International Film Festival, held in Mumbai from 24th January to 1st February, 1952 that he emulated them in his 1953 film, *Do Bigha Zameen* (‘Two Acres of Land’). Even before it, offbeat ethos marked two IPTA films in Mumbai- *Dharti Ke Lal* (‘Children of the Earth’) by K A Abbas and *Neecha Nagar* by Chetan Anand, both released in 1946, and two films in Kolkata- *Chhinnamul* (‘The Uprooted’, 1951) by Nemai Ghosh and *Nagarik* (1952) by Ritwik Ghatak, both members of the undivided Communist Party of India (CPI) at that time.

The story of *Do Bigha Zameen* by Salil Choudhury (also its composer) is about a Bengal peasant, Sambhu who to retrieve his two acres of land from a money-lending *zemindar* in a year of drought, comes with his son to Kolkata and pulls rickshaw. He goes through many odds, survives a near-fatal accident and loses his wife; his son gets involved with petty thieves. When he returns to his village to repay the loan and retrieve his land, he finds a factory built upon it. Although somewhat melodramatic, it was claimed as the first neo-realist Indian film.

Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, born in Panipat (Haryana) in 1914, went over to Mumbai in 1935 to work in *Bombay Chronicle* where occasionally he reviewed films. The newly formed IPTA assigned him to script and direct *Dharti Ke Lal* (‘Children of the Earth’, 1946), based on a popular play in its repertoire, on the misery of peasants of Bengal during the great Famine of 1942-1943. It was a revolutionary film in many ways; the artistes came from IPTA plays (couples like Tripti and Sambhu Mitra and Balraj and Damayanti Sahni) and young Ravi Shankar, then trying to eke out a living in Mumbai, composed its music.

Chetan Anand’s *Neecha Nagar* (1946) was supported by the IPTA but financed by an Indian, settled in Britain. It was a loose adaptation of Maxim Gorky’s novel, *Lower Depths* but its stark realism and morbidity put off common viewers. A rich landowner lives lavishly on a hill while his subjects starve in a village in the valley below, *Neecha*

Nagar. The sewage of the palace flows to the village and cause disease in the villagers. The land-owner dies eventually after a protracted heart attack. Anand used many high and low-angle shots to emphasise class distances to create emotional intensity, sometimes at the expense of reality.

Nemai Ghosh's debut, *Chhinnamul* ('The Uprooted', 1951) depicted, with some actuality footages, the 'uprooted' Hindus, fleeing from the then East Pakistan to West Bengal after the Partition, where it took them many years to settle. Ghosh brought out their misery, the squalor and moral degradation, induced by poverty and homelessness, which recurred in his films, very tellingly in *Subarnarekha* and *Komal Gandhar*. *Chhinnamul* was reactionary, a kind of protest to the unreality of the mainstream; seeing it in Kolkata, many years later, Russian director, I. Pudovkin remarked: "Here I see your country, your people."

Ritwik Ghatak's debut, *Nagarik* ('The Citizen', 1952) was about an unemployed youth in a beleaguered middle-class family in post-War Kolkata, which driven by dire poverty, moved to a slum to live among the more miserable. As no distributor came forward, it lay in cans for 25 years until its token release in 1977, a year after his death (more on the film in Chapter V). A major influence on him at this time was Sergei Eisenstein's silent masterpieces- *Battleship Potemkin*, *Strike* and *Ivan the Terrible*. Getting raw stock of negative film as well as artistes and technicians free, he completed it in 1952. Seeing it, Satyajit Ray remarked that, if it were released in time, Ghatak- not he- would have been the pioneer of Indian neo-realist cinema.

A few of V Shantaram's films were also in this vein. *Dr. Kotnis ki Amar Kahani* (1946), woven around a true story of a medical mission to China and *Dahej* (1950), an exposure of the dowry system were realistic, despite song and dance sequences, strewn here and there. Raj Kapoor's films neither belong to the mainstream, nor to the offbeat. His early films- *Barsaat* (1949), *Awara* (1951) and *Shri 420* (1955) dealt with novel themes but they were not quite realistic. A distinct offbeat ethos marked *Jagte Raho* and its Bengali version, *Ek Din Raatre*, both directed by thespian Sombhu Mitra and Amit Moitra in 1956. Kapoor played the role of a thirsty peasant who wanders through Kolkata in night, looking for drinking water and has a variety of experiences. It was a clear imitation of Charles Chaplin ("Kapoor's character is cut from Chaplin's cloth", said a British critic) and a moving depiction of class distance, the staple of many offbeat films. As *The Guardian* critic, Derek Malcolm remarked to this writer, "Satyajit Ray made films of the poor and Raj Kapoor for the poor". Neo-realist urges also manifested in Satyen Bose's *Rickshawallah* (Bengali) and *Bandish* (Hindi), both in 1955. But *Chhinnamul* and other precursors of *Pather Panchali* did not have the 'poetry of the earth' that Ray captured in swaying reeds in blossom and steam trains running through them, the play of insects on placid water at the advent of autumn.

In the South, the only distinct precursor was a Malayalam film, *Newspaper Boy* (1955) directed by P Ramadas along with some college students and distributed some months before *Pather Panchali*. The director or the producer did not have any

filmmaking experience. A poor boy goes out to earn for the family, as his father, disabled by a factory accident, is laid off. His mother becomes a maidservant and eventually the father dies. He gives up school and after a stint as a servant in a rich man's house, returns to his village, disgusted. He becomes a newspaper vendor to sustain a brother and a sister.

III. Inspiration behind Offbeat Cinema

"The cinema must recruit not only intelligent people but, above all, living souls, the morally richest people."
—Cesare Zavattini

Although Baburao Painter's *Savkari Pash* ('Indian Shylock', 1926) was the first truly realistic film, he did not start a trend, nor were his other films as realistic. He made it on a story about a poor peasant in a Maharashtra village, whom a ruthless money-lender pauperised for a loan he could not repay. While Painter's inspiration came from his observation of Maharashtra countryside, that of Nemai Ghosh, Ritwik Ghatak and Bimal Roy came from neo-realist films of Italy, France and Japan of the 1940s, where a movement of making such films made headway after the Second World War (1939-'45).

In Italy, De Sica was its steadfast exponent and his script-writer, Cesare Zavattini its most ardent ideologue. The latter's views became the credo of the neo-realist cinema in Europe and influenced many young people. In an interview to an Italian journal in 1953, Zavattini said that everyday reality is 'tedious' and uninteresting, when experienced with 'moral and intellectual laziness'. Cinema has always felt it natural and necessary to 'insert a story' in the reality to make it 'spectacular'.

In a seminal article, he said, an approach to reality required "a true and real interest in what is happening, a search for the most deeply hidden human values". To achieve this, he added, "the cinema must recruit not only intelligent people but, above all, living souls, the morally richest people". Illustrating from contemporary neo-realist films, like *Paisan* (1946), *Open City* (1945), *The Bicycle Thief* (1949) and *La Terra Trema* (1948), Zavattini asked, "how to give human life its historical importance at every minute"? and answered it himself.

"In life, in reality today, there are no more empty spaces. Between things, facts, people exists such an inter-dependence that a blow struck for the cinema in Rome could have repercussions all over the world. If this is true, it must be worthwhile to take any moment of a human life and show how 'striking' that moment is; to excavate and identify it, to send its echo vibrating into other parts of the world."

To the diehard accusation that neo-realism only dealt with poverty, Zavattini says, "Neo-realism can and must face poverty. ... The theme of poverty, of rich and poor, is something one can dedicate one's whole life to; we have just begun". However, the function of a neo-realist film is not 'to propound solutions'. "Every moment of the film is in itself, a continuous answer to some questions.... It is enough, and quite a lot, I should say, to make an audience feel the need, the urgency, for them."

These were the ideas behind the emerging new cinema in Italy and France; it had a parallel in Japan where Kurosawa, Imamura and Ozu were also making realist films. Of seminal influence in Japan and Europe was Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1952), awarded in Cannes Festival and hailed as a great film.

A wind of realism began to blow in Bengali cinema too after popularity abroad of *Pather Panchali*. There came a rash of realist films by various other directors also, like Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, and Rajen Tarafdar. The climax came with Mrinal Sen's Hindi *Bhuban Shome* in 1969; no other offbeat film before it was such a countrywide success. In an article in 1971, Satyajit Ray wrote: "There is a belief gaining currency in film circle that a new wave of sorts is lapping the shores of Indian cinema".

In his book, *Views on Cinema*, Sen identified six elements of the 'Indian New Wave', as the sudden spurt was named by the media, e.g. an 'unusual' production with no big star or glamour, featuring mostly non-professional artistes, generally shot outdoor, having a low budget, mixing actuality and fiction and involving 'young, frugal enthusiasts'. Sen tried to explain, why the so-called 'Indian New Wave' did not start with *Pather Panchali* but had to wait until his *Bhuban Shome*. He said, Ray's debut *did* enthuse 'a very small section of the film-traders', but it could not go very far. "The natural urge for security also made them revert to the studios and the sets, and make big-budget films, leading to an uncertain co-existence of the commercial and artistic".

Debate

Writing on the emerging genre at about the same time, Satyajit Ray praised the initiative of the Film Finance Corporation to promote low-budget offbeat films but noted certain 'limitations'. He warned, "Offbeaters will have no access to permissive sex for a long time yet" and art theatres for screening such films will be tardy. He said, "Offbeat, like most other things in life, comes in three varieties-good, bad and indifferent...Trash of conventional type may succeed but never the offbeat".

He thought, the urge to give up the narrative, which manifested in Sen's films in his middle period, was fraught with danger. "By discarding the story altogether, one could be destroying the very basis of a film that a lot of people are expected to see and like". The temptation to avoid a conventional story and substituting it with 'a patchwork of ideas *à la* Godard' can be another pitfall for an offbeat director. Ray also prescribed a simple framework for offbeat films. "I would even suggest that a filmmaker who wishes to use the modern idiom has even greater need of a simple framework". He also did not approve of doing away with the 'star'. "The advantage of having such a star, especially for the offbeat filmmaker, is truly immense".

Ray attributed *Bhuban Shome*'s success not to the 'new aspects' but to the use of 'some of the most popular conventions of the cinema which helped soften the edges of its occasional spiky syntax'- a good-looking heroine (Suhasini Mulay), good background music (by Vijay Raghav Rao) and a wholesome wish-fulfilling story about a 'Big Bad Bureaucrat Reformed by Rustic Belle'. He also criticised Sen's use of new camera and

editing techniques. "The modern idiom, unless backed by a genuinely modern attitude to life and society, is apt to degenerate into gimmickry and empty flamboyance...The true artist is recognisable in his style and his attitude and not in his idiosyncrasies."

IV. *Pather Panchali*: The Benchmark Film

“When India’s Satyajit Ray won top honours at Cannes for his Pather Panchali (1956) and at Venice the following year for his Aparajito, it suddenly became impossible to ignore completely the Indian film industry any longer.”
—Arthur Knight (in *The Liveliest Art*, 1957)

Akin to the revolution brought about by the addition of soundtrack in 1931 and that of colour in the 1960s was the release of a low-budget Bengali film, *Pather Panchali* in three Kolkata cinema-halls on 26th August 1955. Its maker, Satyajit Ray, an enormously tall (6' 3") and dark man of 34, was known among the Kolkata intelligentsia as the scion of Bengal's two most famous children's writers- Upendra Kishor roy Choudhury and Sukumar Roy- and a good commercial artist, designing excellent book-covers and jackets. The Brahmo family of Kolkata in which he was born on 2nd May 1921, is comparable to Rabindranath Tagore's in another part of the city in its dedication to, and practice of, literature (mainly for children), music, drawing, printing and publishing, to which Satyajit added cinema.

After graduating with honours in Economics at the age of 19 from Kolkata Presidency College in 1940, he went over to Rabindranath Tagore's open-air university, Viswa Bharati in Santiniketan (about 150 kilometres northwest of Kolkata) to study fine art, while the poet was still alive. Tagore had confided to his mother that in a séance he held with Satyajit's father, Sukumar, he was requested to take him under his tutelage. Sukumar Roy died in 1923 of scarlet fever, when Satyajit was only 2½ years old. Ray's widowed mother was also keen that he took the fine arts course under Nandalal Bose and Binode Behari Mukherjee in Santiniketan. When as a child he visited Santiniketan with his mother, the poet wrote on his autograph a short rhyme, “I have travelled widely to see seas and mountains but did not see at my doorstep dewdrops on a blade of grass”. This became a kind of credo for his filmmaking, as he said, “to see the universe in a dew drop” He could draw sketches, paint and take still photos as a boy and was a voracious reader. He took to listening, and learnt to make notations of, Western classical music from the age of 14 and made a huge collection of records, which he played on his gramophone and went to bed with their notations. In this, his future wife, Bijoya (his maternal uncle's daughter, slightly older than him) was his lifelong companion and shared his interests.

At Santiniketan, he woke up to the beauty of the bare countryside. He was deeply influenced by the celebrated art teacher, Nandalal Bose who taught his pupils to draw ‘organically’, i.e. if they were drawing a tree, they should do so from the roots upward,

as it grows. In its Central Library, he browsed through books on film aesthetics, e.g. by Paul Rotha ('The Film Till Now'), Raymond Spottiswoode ('A Grammar of the Film') and Rudolph Arnheim ('Film as Art'). After the Japanese bombing of Kolkata in 1943, he gave up the course and cutting short a field tour with some like-minded friends, returned to the city to be with his mother, then living with her brother in Ballygunge. Soon after, he joined a British advertising firm, D J Keymer as an art designer on a monthly salary of 75 rupees, which rose to a 'princely' sum in ten years when he became a director of the firm. He was also designing delightful book covers and jackets and doing illustrations for new and reprinted books from Signet Press, owned and run by an innovative publisher, Dilip Gupta.

While illustrating an abridged children's edition of Bibhuti Bhushan Banerjee's novel, *Pather Panchali* (1928), he was struck by its cinematic potential. Nurturing a desire to make films, some day, he chose it, or Tagore's *Ghare Baire*, to be his debut. He was sent by his company to work in its London office in May, 1950 for five months. Arriving in London, he saw with his wife, on the very first day, two films, one of which was De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief*. He resolved that evening that if he would make a film some day, it would be like De Sica's. The influence of the Italian master on him was so deep that in an article in a Kolkata daily, he wrote: "The Indian filmmaker must turn to life and reality, and his ideal should be de Sica, not de Mille". They saw over 100 films in five months in London and travelled to other European cities to see museums and other cultural heritages. While sailing home, he drew some scenes of *Pather Panchali* in wash sketches that he later donated to the *Cinematheque Paris*. He showed them to some producers and directors of Kolkata, including Bimal Roy but none evinced any interest in producing the film, saying it won't sell and could not be shot wholly outdoor.

Since boyhood, Ray saw a plethora of European and American films, his favourite directors being David Lean, Frank Capra, John Huston, John Ford, William Wyle, Ernst Lubitsch, Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Jean Renoir and Billy Wilder. Their films used to be shown in Kolkata, soon after releases in the West. In cinema, his interest gradually veered from great artistes to great directors; in the darkness of the hall, he took notes of editing and music. Sometimes when a Bengali film on a well-known story was announced for release, he would write its script and compare it with the released film. His boyhood interest in cinema abided and deepened so much in youth that he and Chidananda Dasgupta launched the Calcutta Film Society on India's Independence Day, 15 August 1947, India's third.

Seen in the context of contemporary Bengali and even Indian films, *Pather Panchali* was a revolution. The novel is a rambling tale of a child, Apu, his elder sister, Durga, an old widow- his father's elder sister- and parents in a south Bengal village, living in dire poverty. The mother chides the wizened auntie for petty foibles; twice she left home to stay with a sympathetic villager. Her second departure ended in her pathetic death in a bamboo grove. Soon afterward, Durga, drenched in first monsoon rain, dies of pneumonia in a stormy night. The father, who left home seeking fortune, returns after hunger and the loss of the daughter nearly undid the mother and the child. He has earned

well from reading of scriptures and performing religious rites of rich people, with which he had planned to repair the house and make everybody happy. Hearing of the daughter's death from his disconsolate wife, he breaks down. With virtually nothing left to live on, they leave the village for Varanasi to eke out a living by reading scriptures on its famous *ghats*.

The film was not easy to make. He and two like-minded friends- Subrata Mitra, a still photographer and Bansi Chandragupta, a Kashmiri young man aspiring to be an Art Director- scouted for locations outside Kolkata on weekends. He took loan from his insurance policies, sold his books and gramophone disks and began shooting the film on holidays with a Mitchell camera in 1952. When the raw stock and money ran out, he secretly pawned his wife's jewellery to buy some more, with which about half of the film could be shot. For the next two years, the incomplete film lay in cans, inducing a depression in him. Distressed by the son's frustration, his mother approached West Bengal Chief Minister, Dr. B C Roy through a friend, to request for government support to enable his son complete the film. The great doctor-politician liked the unusual film so much that he granted a loan of two lakh rupees, ignoring a senior officer's opposition, from the Public Works (Road) Department (*Pather Panchali* means 'Song of the Road').

Even before it was completed, word spread abroad that an unusual Bengali film was in the making in Kolkata. A representative of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Monroe Wheeler, then touring India to collect exhibits for a big exposition of Indian art to be held in the US city, met Ray in Kolkata and saw the rushes. He asked Ray to finish it quickly and send a print to MOMA before the exhibition in 1954. Ray also showed some 2500 metres of its rushes to the Hollywood celebrity, John Huston who passed through Kolkata on location hunting. Returning to New York, Huston recommended the film to Wheeler who cabled Ray to send it speedily. It was completed in a 'mad rush, working for ten days and nights, sleeplessly' with editor, Dulal Datta. Not having time to see the final print, Ray took it straight to Pan Am flights counter in Kolkata, where he fell asleep in fatigue during its booking. It reached the MOMA in time and was shown in the exhibition, signalling its worldwide popularity.

Two months later, on 26th August 1955, it was released in three cinema halls in Kolkata and almost instantly, the city woke up to its elemental appeal and beauty; it ran for 13 weeks, rare for a Bengali film. Its world premiere was held in New York after the shows in the MOMA; it had a record eight-month run in a Fifth Avenue cinema, which was repeated, 25 years later, in 1980, in a Manhattan hall, usually showing Indian films. One estimate has it that *Pather Panchali* is shown at least once, every day, in some country or the other, making its deceased creator 'India's cine ambassador to the world'. Its roll of honours is staggering. At home, it won the President's gold medal in 1955 and over the years, 11 more, notably the 'Golden Palm' at Cannes (as the 'best human document'), Diploma of Merit at Edinburgh, Vatican Award at Rome, 'best film' and 'best direction' awards at San Francisco, Selznick Golden Laurel' at Berlin in 1957, the 'best foreign film awards' of 1959 in New York and at Tokyo.

However, not everybody was effusive. Francois Truffeaut walked out during its screening at Cannes in 1956, irritated by its slow pace. A London critic carped at its rural landscape, ‘Pad, pad, pad, through the paddy field’ but its deep empathy and humanism moved even the most cynical.

The rest is history. There is no major festival abroad from which it did not get a prize. Its appeal has remained undiminished and 37 years after it was made, selected film critics and writers from all over the world voted it as the ‘sixth best film of the world’ in the ten-yearly poll, taken by *Sight & Sound*, London in 1992. Penelope Houston, its editor, remarked in her book, *Contemporary Cinema* (1963),

“Ray came along to recharge the batteries of humanist cinema at a time when neo-realism had sacrificed its momentum. Until someone else comes along to change it, Satyajit Ray’s Bengal will be the cinema’s India.”

It remained a benchmark film not only in India’s offbeat genre but in Ray’s corpus too, viewers often comparing his subsequent films with it. In an article in *The Statesman*, Kolkata in 1948, seven years before his debut, Satyajit Ray had observed:

“Let us face the truth. There has yet been no Indian film, which could be acclaimed on all counts. Where other countries have achieved, we have only attempted and that too not always with honesty, so that even our best films have to be accepted with the gently apologetic proviso that it is after all an Indian film.”

The world has since admitted that *Pather Panchali* was indeed an exception.

V. Satyajit Ray nourishes the Genre

“Only that which does not teach, which does not persuade, which does not cry out, which does not condescend, which does not explain, is irresistible.”
—W B Yeats

The unexpected success of *Pather Panchali* made Satyajit Ray bold to adopt filmmaking as a career. He gave up the job with D J Keymer with a ‘princely salary’, saying “one cannot serve two masters”. *Pather Panchali*’s renown snowballed in his home State and abroad. He set aside his previous plans of filming Tagore’s *Ghare Baire* and a Bengali adaptation of *Prisoner of Zenda* but decided to return to the Apu story in a sequel, based on the same writer’s novel, *Aparajito*, from which also came the outline of the story of the third part of Apu trilogy, *Apur Sansar*.

Other Features

Aparajito (‘Unvanquished’, 1956) began with a lyrical recreation of Apu’s boyhood in Varanasi where his father dies of pneumonia. He returns with his mother to her parents’ village and giving up ancestral priestly job, gets into a school against her mother’s initial unwillingness. He passes the final examination with a scholarship and goes to Kolkata to study in a college. Left alone, his mother languishes in penury and privation; she writes to him to return and take care of her but he does not, having no leave. She fades out and dies; when he returns home, he does not find her. The loss and sorrow do not break him; he returns, ‘unvanquished’, to Kolkata to seek a livelihood.

The fluidity of *Pather Panchali* returned in the sequel, as Subrata Mitra’s newly bought Arriflex lingered over the steep *ghats* of Varanasi, the sudden flight of pigeons at the shrill cry of his mother on his father’s death, the dance of fire-flies in the darkness when the ailing mother pines for him, the sombre evening worship and *Aarati* amid gongs in Kashi Viswanath temple. Surprisingly, it missed the President’s Gold Medal (it went to Tapan Sinha’s *Kabuliwala*) but became the first Indian film to win the prestigious Golden Lion of St. Mark (given to the world’s best feature film of the year) at Venice Festival, decided by a jury, headed by Rene Clair. As the news electrified India and the foreign press raved, Kolkata newspapers, which wrote down the film, made a U-turn to praise it. Stanley Kauffman compared it with Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* and *Moana of the South Seas*, having “in addition to its documentary interest. . . much greater interest as a drama than the first picture”.

Poor box-office returns of *Aparajito* before it was acclaimed in Venice, drove Ray to make a comedy, *Parash Pathar* (‘The Touchstone’) in 1957. The comedy emanated

from the dialogue as much as from the situations. While returning from office, a middle-aged clerk of Kolkata picks up a stone in monsoon rain and finds it to be the proverbial touchstone that turns every metal into gold. This makes him fabulously rich and helps fulfil many of his, and his wife's, desires. He dreams of becoming a politician with this wealth but irritated by an insult in a cocktail party of the city's rich and the elite, demonstrates the miracle of the touchstone. The newspapers flash it and as he and his wife try to flee from the city, the police chase and catch them. Meanwhile, his private secretary whom he gave it, swallows the stone and digests it, to every body's relief. As Ray said, the film is a 'combination of comedy, fantasy, satire, farce and a touch of pathos' with memorable rendering of the lucky clerk by Tulsi Chakravorti (the village school teacher in *Pather Panchali*).

As *Parash Pathar* too did not run well in Kolkata, Ray looked for a story which will have ample scope for music and dance, for which Bengalees have an inborn craving. He chose a novel by Tarasankar Bandyopadhyaya and made his next film, *Jalsaghar* ('The Music Room', 1958). It turned out to be far more serious than a musical, being on the conflict between passé feudalism and emerging capitalism in Bengal. Made with an eye to the home audience and box-office success, to his surprise, it became a rave on the French TV in 1984, like his last film, *Agantuk* after his death. An aged landlord's passion for Hindusthani classical music and dance in an ancestral music room depletes his treasury. To beat a Philistine *nouveau rich* nephew, he holds an expensive musical soiree (*Jalsha* in Bengali) and gives away the last gold coins from the chest. The same night, a boat bringing home his wife and son from her parent's house, capsizes in a storm on river *Padma*. Drunken and demented, he rides and spurs his pet stallion along the bank, falls down and dies.

Shot in an old and abandoned palace on the bank of *Bhagirathi* (a branch of the *Ganga*) in Murshidabad district, it has a rich repertoire of Hindustani classical music, both vocal and instrumental, an enchanting *Kathak* dance by Roshan Kumari, a *thumri* by Akhtari Bai and a *khayal* by Salamat Ali Khan. Its astounding popularity in France was not so much for its music and dance but for its moving portrayal of feudal decline in Bengal. The intermediary (*zamindari*) system was abolished in West Bengal soon after Independence and land, held by *zaminders* in excess of a ceiling of 17 acres vested in the State and given away to the landless. Ray had no sympathy for this passé feudalism (being inclined to Marxism, at this time) but 'sympathised' with the aristocratic landlord. "I am interested in all dying traditions; this man who believes in his future is for me a pathetic figure."

After *Jalsaghar*, he again returned to the Apu story and made the last film of the trilogy, *Apur Sansar* ('The World of Apu'). It was developed from one long paragraph in the novel, *Aparajito*, a testimony to Ray's creative genius. It took up the cue from the end of *Aparajito* and recreated Apu's desolate life in Kolkata after his mother's death, his foray in writing an autobiographical novel, his trip with a friend to a riverine village in East Bengal (now Bangladesh), where he marries a landlord's pretty daughter to save her from celibacy, his brief marital happiness till she leaves for a fatal child-birth,

his self-willed exile after his wife's death in a coal mine out of a sense of vacuity in life and his return to Kolkata with his uncared for son to start a new life.

Besides winning the President's Gold Medal, *Apur Sansar* got the Sutherland Award for Best Original & Imaginative Film in London Festival in 1960 and was adjudged the 'Best Foreign Film of the Year' by the U S National Board of Review of Motion Pictures; it also received a Diploma of Merit in Edinburgh Film Festival, the same year. TIME, praising its 'craftsmanship', adjudged it as 'the finest film of the three (Apu trilogy)'. In an interview to *Sight & Sound* (1970), Ray said, the trains in the trilogy were 'a kind of running motif,' symbolizing 'connections between the rural and metropolitan India'.

Satyajit Ray avoided repetition and went for a variety of themes and milieu. Completing 'Apu trilogy', a comedy and a musical, he now turned to make a totally different kind of film, a study of Hindu superstition. *Devi* ('The Goddess') is based on a story, told by Rabindranath Tagore to a fellow writer, Prabhat Mukhopadhyaya (being a Brahmo, he feared he would be misunderstood by Hindus) about a landlord's obsessed belief, formed by a dream, that his youngest son's wife is an incarnation of goddess Kali. The young woman is worshipped with fanfare, while her husband studies English literature in Kolkata, helplessly watching her drift to doom. A dying child revives, being given her *charanamrita* (holy concoction). The news of the apparent miracle spreads by word of mouth and brings a stream of devotees and worshippers. When her elder sister-in-law's child falls ill, 'Devi' promises to cure him with her 'divine power' but fails. The child's death demolishes her delusion of being a goddess. Going out of mind, she runs away, falls and dies on a riverbank, admitting to her husband that she was *not* a goddess. When the film was released in Kolkata on 19th February 1960, it aroused protest and anger in Hindus who attributed its iconoclasm to Ray's Brahmoism. He is more of an atheist than a believer and once said: "It is truer to say that man created God than God created man." An export ban was imposed on the film for some time until Nehru lifted it. It was awarded the President's Gold Medal in 1961.

After paying tributes to Rabindranath in his birth centenary year through three short features and a documentary (discussed below) in 1961, Ray wrote the story for his next film, *Kanchanjungha*, his first film in colour, dealing with the inner turmoil of an affluent Bengali family, holidaying in Darjeeling. Members of an aristocratic Bengali family with various worries on their minds stroll in the hill station on the last day of their holiday to have the last glimpse of the Kanchanjungha (the Himalaya's highest peak in India) before they return to Kolkata. The happenings in the film take a hundred odd minutes, coinciding almost with the screen time, A British-awarded industrialist would like a rich eligible suitor propose to his youngest daughter, which the mother, inwardly suffering, resents. The daughter instead takes a fancy for a lower middle-class young man whom his uncle had brought to the hills to meet and solicit the industrialist for a job. The eligible bachelor in the end proposes but the girl makes a lukewarm response. The marriage of his eldest daughter goes on the rock, as her husband finds her letters to a lover. The industrialist's playboy son chases hill girls and a bachelor ornithologist uncle chases birds to see them through his binocular.

The film, released on 11th May 1962, did not run well in Kolkata; it was dubbed 'complex and incomprehensible' but the noted film critic, David Ansey, seeing it 15 years later (1977), was effusive. "With a gentle resonance worthy of Chekhov, Ray sees in the family, a microcosm of the social tensions pulling India apart". It had the first full background score by him after *Teen Kanya* with which he began composing scores of his own and others' films also, besides scripting, directing and helping on the camera.

The urge for variety took him in 1962 to do a very different film, *Abhijaan* ('The Expedition', 1962). He wrote its script only to help a friend filmmaker, Bijoy Chatterjee but while watching it being shot among the rocks of Dubrajpur, near Santiniketan, he got interested and took over its direction. Based on a novel by Tarashankar Banerjee, it is about a brave Rajput taxi driver, ferrying his 1930 Chrysler between railway stations. He is enamoured of a Christian lady teacher whom he helps, unwillingly, to elope with a lame lover. Frustrated, he helps a Marwari trader in smuggling and makes love to his upcountry concubine (Waheeda Rehman). There are fine sequences of his ramshackle taxi overtaking a steaming train, a fist fight in a moonlit night with a rival, his monologues near a granite rock, 'weighing like the burden of sin' and his romance with the smuggler's woman. The film ran well in Kolkata but critics carped at its commercial claptrap, rather alien to Ray's style; the film helped him and his producer financially.

After this *tour de force*, Ray took the story of a middle-class couple in Kolkata and made his first film, *Mahanagar* ('The Big City', 1963) of the so-called 'Kolkata Tetralogy'; three others are *Pratidwandi* (1970), *Seemabaddha* (1971) and *Jana Aranya* (1975), although no common theme or story binds them. After *Jana Aranya*, Satyajit Ray said, whatever he had to say and show of Kolkata, he had put in these four films; there was nothing to add.

Mahanagar is apparently the story of a lower middle-class housewife deciding to work in a private company to help the needy family. She does well in the job but create some tension in the family and her husband's jealousy. Eventually, she resigns in protest against maltreatment of an Anglo-Indian woman colleague by the office boss and returns to the street with her husband (also rendered jobless) to seek some other jobs. It went well with Kolkata's middle class but an Anglo-Indian M.P. hearing about it from others, charged Ray with showing his community in bad light. Mrs. Indira Gandhi, then Minister of Information & Broadcasting herself saw the film and disagreed with the M.P., because the housewife herself protests against the prejudice about Anglo-Indians. However, the furore came in the way of its getting anything higher than a Certificate of Merit from the President in 1964 but at Berlin, it got the Silver Bear for Best Direction, the same year.

Vindication of women's rights, not for seeking livelihood outside home but for loving men of their choice, led Ray to make a film on a long story by Rabindranath, *Nasthanirh*, (1901) which was probably inspired by his relation with his elder brother's wife, Kadambari Devi (who died by taking an overdose of opium), or as recent researchers say, his wife's relation with a coeval nephew, Balendranath who died early. *Charulata* (1964) turned out to be a major film and according to him and many admirers, a peak he

could not surpass in his later films. In an interview to A I R: Kolkata (taken by this writer), he said: “Everything was right for *Charulata*; if I were to do it again, I would do it just the same”. He gave it the structure of a symphony. “I thought endlessly of Mozart for *Charulata*.”

Charulata is a young and pretty wife of an absentee landlord, imbued with nationalistic urges of the time. The childless woman feels lonely and bored in a big house, as her husband is occupied, most of the time, with bringing out a weekly anti-government newspaper, editorially sympathising with the freedom fighters. Into this milieu comes her husband’s brother (*devar*, meaning ‘second husband’) from a college hostel after examination and both develop companionship on common interests and pastime of literature. A budding writer, he used to read out his published pieces to *Charulata* but one day not finding her nearby, she reads out one to her brother’s wife, brought over from a village to give her company. *Charulata* fumes in jealousy and in revenge writes about her childhood in a riverine village with a ‘true voice of feeling’. When it is published in a more popular magazine, she throws it at her *devar* who is amazed by her literary talent. As their relations turn amorous, he leaves the family, feeling he was betraying his brother. He mellows to marry an unknown girl, accepting an offer from her father to go to England for further study with dowry money. Her husband’s business crashes, betrayed by her own trusted brother, the manager of the press. While thus beset by misfortune, he discovers his wife’s secret amour for his brother. She tries to mend the relations but a gap remains; their hands do not meet.

Ray made it a flawless period piece with excellent art direction by Bansi Chandragupta. His appreciation of ‘intelligent beauty’ in women was fully met by Madhabi Mukherjee, in the role of *Charulata*. The refusal by the Cannes Festival to award it on the ground that it was ‘too much like his previous films’ upset Ray and left a permanent scar. However, it won the prize for Best Direction and Catholic Award at Berlin in 1965 and Best Film Award in Acapulco, the same year. Its reviews in the Western press and media have been the most perceptive. *Charulata* remains one of his best films and as Andrew Robinson predicts, “it will find its niche among 20 best films ever made”.

The box-office failure of *Kapurush-o-Mahapurush* (1965) led him to render his own story about a matinee idol’s high-pressure and masked life, as revealed to a journalist lady, travelling with him in a train to Delhi to receive a national award. *Nayak* presented some of his ideas on film acting too, which he had redeemed from theatricality. He cast Bengali cinema’s legendary ‘hero’ at that time, Uttam Kumar. The train motif which runs so metaphorically through the Apu trilogy, became in *Nayak* the locale, as the film showed the matinee idol in various moods and stresses during the 17-hour journey from Kolkata to New Delhi on board a prestigious super fast train (‘Rajdhani Express’), introduced recently. Bansi Chandragupta’s interior set for the train, the bog of currency notes in which the ‘hero’ sinks, as into quicksand and chase of a girl who wants to be his ‘heroine’ in two surrealistic dream sequences, bringing his troubled subconscious into the open, details of various passengers and their reactions to him were pure cinema.

Uttam Kumar's appearance, first in a Ray film, made it a huge box office success; during its premiere in three Kolkata halls a "Roman arena hysteria was in evidence". It won the Critics' Prize in Berlin and was admired by Pasolini.

Chiriakhana ('The Zoo', 1967) that followed *Nayak* is a detective film. It ran well in Kolkata because of Uttam Kumar's second appearance in a Ray film in the role of a sleuth. It is one of his least praised films but was the crucible of his later detective films, *Sonar Kella* (1974) and *Joi Baba Felunath* (1978). *Chiriakhana*, based on a story by Saradindu Bandyopadhyaya, was not too bad as a detective film; the sleuth identifies the murderer in a slum through clever analyses of clues and circumstances. Ray wrote his second song in this film, *Bhalobasar Tumi Kee Jano?* ("What do you know of love?"); the first was *Ebar Torey Chinechhi Ma* in Ramprasadi tune in *Devi* (1960).

Ray's next film, *Goopy Gyne, Bagha Byne* ('Adventures of Goopy & Bagha', 1969) was for children in the family tradition. His father and grandfather were noted writers for children. Upendra Kishor's tales of birds, animals and simple village folk and Sukumar's non-sense rhymes and hilarious fantasy plays are still favourites of Bengali children. He chose a grandfather's tale about two rustic young men, Goopy and Bagha. They are exiled for their inept music-making by a rude king into a forest where they see a 6½ minute visually stunning dances of ghosts (allegorising various periods of Indian history). The king of ghosts gives them three boons- they could fly anywhere in a moment putting on a pair of slippers, get any food they want and mesmerise all with their songs. With these three boons, they help a good king win a war against a bad king (who is actually his estranged brother) on camels' back. Keeping his promise, the king gives the hands of his two daughters to them and keeps them in his palace.

GGBB is a hilarious comedy, a shade above *Parash Pathar*, which amuses children and adults alike, there being several layers of meaning and appeal. On the face of it, it is a fantasy tale, an allegory of two 'innocents abroad'; actually, it is an anti-war film in the form of a parable. It satirizes the craze for political power and the absurdity of war, like some Brecht plays. Ray said, he did it with his son, Sandip in mind, then eight, who found his films too sad and serious and wanted him to make a film for children as "there are no films made for the young in India - no good films ever". Although it had a dim appreciation abroad, at home, it became, like *Charulata*, a box-office super-hit. With 11 and 22 years apart, it had two sequels - *Hirak Rajar Deshe* (1980) and *Goopy Bagha Phire Elo* (1991), the last directed by his son on his script and music; together they are called 'Goopy Bagha' trilogy.

The next film, *Aranyer Din Ratri* ('Days and Nights in the Forest', 1970) treated an adult theme. Four young men go out of Kolkata for a few days to holiday in the rain forests on Bengal-Bihar border. They come across two city women and a tribal girl but each reacts differently to them. One - a sportsman- jilted by a city girl- woos and has sex with a Santhal (tribal) girl. Another, a Company Executive, is attracted to the daughter of a local Bengali resident. The third, a Labour Officer, takes fancy to his widowed daughter-in-law but when she offers herself in the privacy of her room, he

sweats. The two women suddenly announce that they would go to Kolkata to attend a wedding, leaving the four young men without any further interest in the forest.

Although it got no award in India or abroad, it went well in the West. Pauline Kael wrote in *New Yorker*: "Ray seems to add something specifically eastern to the 'natural' style of Jean Renoir." The sequence that everybody liked was of the Memory Game that these four men and two women play after a picnic. The first utters a prominent name; the next repeats it and adds one and so on, until the names become too many to be repeated correctly; whosoever does, wins.

Two of his four films on facets of life in Kolkata followed next. The first, *Mahanagar* was made in 1963 and the fourth, *Jana Aranya* came in 1975. The last three were set in Kolkata of the 1970s, a turbulent decade, vitiated by Naxalite violence in the State, the second influx of refugees into the city from East Pakistan, which became Bangladesh in 1972 and the rigours of Internal Emergency proclaimed in 1975. Together they are sometimes also called 'Kolkata Trilogy'.

Pratidwandi ('The Adversary' or 'Siddhartha & the City', 1970) on a story by Sunil Ganguly is about unemployment and its corroding effect on the young people. Wandering for a job, a young man, Siddhartha who had to give up medical study after his father's death, has many frustrations. His elder sister has sex appeal for advancement in office; a brother indulges in extremist politics. Old college friends, one of whom even takes him to a prostitute from whom he flees in fear, enliven his evenings. A neighbouring girl, daughter of an Income Tax Officer, is drawn to him but their amour is clouded by her widower father's affair with her maternal aunt. Waiting long with others for an interview, he gets into a rage over inordinate delay and callousness of interviewers and goes on a rampage. To get away from it all, he becomes, reluctantly, a medical sales representative, leaves the depressing city, and settles in a quiet, riverine town of north Bengal.

Seemabaddha (1971) is on a story by a popular novelist, Shankar about the unethical compromise made by a young Company Executive to climb office ladder and become a Director-cum-Board Member of a British-owned company. Despite a brilliant academic career, he takes up a job in a fan-manufacturing company and soon becomes a Sales Manager. His wife's unmarried sister comes on a holiday and takes a liking for him. A crisis brews in the office, as an export consignment is rejected in final inspection. To justify the delay in the shipment of a fresh consignment, he engineers on the advice of a colleague a strike in the factory, leading to a lockout. For saving the company from loss and disgrace, he is made a director but while he and his wife rejoice, the admiring sister-in-law leaves, disillusioned to find that so brilliant a scholar has also joined the rat race.

Satyajit Ray was, for many years, the butt of Marxist writers for being 'non-committal' to contemporary issues, to which he once replied, "Commitment to what? I commit myself to human beings; that's a good enough commitment for me." *Seemabaddha* exemplified this kind of commitment. In an interview to *Sight & Sound* (1972-'73), Ray

said that his political films were not like Godard's or Glauber Rocha's, "because I still believe in the individual and in personal concepts rather than in a broad ideology which keeps changing all the time."

For his next film in 1973, Ray returned, after 14 years, to a Bibhuti Bhushan story, set in the shadows of Bengal Famine of 1942-'43. When it broke out in rural Bengal, he was only 21 and mostly in Santiniketan, pursuing his fine arts course. Poor and hungry people were trekking to Kolkata from the countryside and begging for rice gruel to keep alive and collapsing on Kolkata streets in hordes. His sensitivity and conscience were, curiously, not much roused; as if to expiate this moral sloth, he decided to film the novel, *Ashani Sanket* (1946), noted for stark realism and depiction of the approaching famine which took a toll of some five million people in Bengal.

A young Brahmin and his pretty wife settle in a village of low caste people to perform their religious rites and teach their children. As the Second World War spreads to the eastern theatre, paddy and rice from villages are procured by the government for the troops, causing scarcity and pushing up the prices. Inevitably, rural peace is shattered and hunger erodes human relations. The respected Brahmin is roughed up, while queuing to buy some rice. To survive, his wife tries to dig out a jungle-potato with some other women when a man, hidden in the shrubs, attempts to rape her; they kill and throw him in a stream. A married woman, doing her errands, sells her body for a handful of rice. An old man returns with a horde of children to stay with them and a low-caste woman, who used to help them, dies starving. Amid these gathering clouds, the wife confides in the Brahmin that she has conceived, while another horde of starving people is seen coming to them.

The film did well in Kolkata and abroad. It won the President's Gold Medal, the Golden Hugo in Chicago in 1973 and the Golden Bear in Berlin, next year; for its music also, Ray received a national award. It made a big impact on Western viewers and critics. Kolkata critics, however, found its magnificent Eastman colour inconsistent with the theme of hunger and death during an approaching famine, to which Ray replied that despite famine, Nature was green and bountiful, because the famine was man-made.

Sonar Kella (1974) was based on his own story about a six-year old boy having, to the distress of his parents, uncanny memory of his previous birth, from which he draws camels and peacocks etc. forgetting sleep and play. A golden fortress that he also talks about intrigues a para-psychologist who imagines it to be somewhere in Rajasthan. A newspaper report on the boy, which construes his memory of jewels hidden in the fort, tempts two crooks to kidnap him but they abduct another boy of the vicinity by mistake but set him free. As the para-psychologist takes him to Rajasthan to identify the fortress, the crooks follow them on the train and throw the psychologist from the rampart of another fort during a break-journey. They take the boy on the trail of the treasure but before it, the boy's father, sensing danger, engages a private detective, Feluda (who appears in a number of such stories by Ray). Aided by a younger assistant, he chases the crooks to Jaisalmer fort of amber sandstone that is identified by the boy as the

‘Golden Fortress’ where he had lived in previous birth. Feluda rescues the boy from the crooks and he is cured of his obsession with memories of previous birth.

When it was released, rationalists protested to Ray’s implicit belief in rebirth and para-psychology but the film was well-received in West Bengal and won several national and State awards. At Teheran Festival for Children & Young Adults, it was even adjudged the Best Feature film of 1975. The West Bengal Government financed this and his four other films-*Pather Panchali*, *Hirak Rajar Deshe*, *Sukumar Ray* and *Ganashatru*.

The fourth Kolkata film, *Jana Aranya* (1975) was received better than the previous three. Shown abroad as *The Middleman*; it was based on another story by Shankar and set in Kolkata of the mid-1970s. It returned to the theme of unemployment, and how it demoralized and corrupted usually decent persons. A lower middle class boy of Kolkata fares badly in BA examination because of an examiner’s freak and wanders looking for a job. Failing in an interview, he takes to an order-supply business, helped by a sympathetic elder. His penury is somewhat eased but to get a lucrative contract, from a company he eventually takes a call girl to the Purchase Officer in a hotel; to his horror, she turns out, to be his friend’s sister. He winces but the girl insists on the deal that gets him the coveted contract. Ray called it a ‘dark comedy’, a study not only of unemployment but also of urban corruption and social decay. It went well at home and abroad, receiving the national award for ‘Best Direction’, as well as a prize at Karlovy Vary in 1976.

Joi Baba Felunath (‘The Elephant God’, 1978), the title echoing the contemporary Bengali mythological super-hits like *Jai Baba Taraknath*, was again about an investigation by Feluda, the private sleuth “who does *Yoga*, constantly updates his general knowledge and solves crimes not with brawn but brain”. The English title refers to the Hindu god, *Ganesha* whose gold statuette is stolen from a Bengali aristocratic family of Varanasi; it is to recover this that Feluda is engaged. Ray returned to the holy city as his locale after *Aparajito* (1956), which was to him as cinematic as Venice. While holidaying in Varanasi with his junior and a fellow thriller-writer (his foil), Feluda visits a crook in the guise of a holy man, Macchli Baba (so named for his swimming feat) who is suspected to have stolen the Ganesh idol but ultimately, a replica of the original idol is recovered from the mouth of the clay lion on which goddess Durga rides during *Durga Puja* festival. The film got the national award for the Best Children’s Film of 1978.

The sequel to *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*, the second part of Goopy Bagha trilogy, ‘*Hirak Rajar Deshe* (‘The Kingdom of Diamonds’) was made in 1980 and turned out to be an allegory on fascist tendencies in rulers. After five years of luxury and laziness, confined in the palace with their princess wives, Goopy and Bagha, at the behest of the king, journey through varied landscapes to the Kingdom of Diamonds to attend the king’s throne ceremony. Reaching there, they come upon and befriend a primary school teacher who was hiding in a rock cave to escape the king’s wrath. He tells them of the oppression and poverty of the people and the closing of his school, while the king gets richer by sale of diamonds, dug out of a mine by his ill-paid subjects. The king suppresses dissidence among subjects by beating and getting them ‘brain-washed’ in a menacing machine,

developed by a 'researcher', after which they sing his praises. Goopy and Bagha bemuse the king and courtiers with their song, as per the ghost king's boon. While celebrations begin for installation of the king's statue, they visit the king's treasury at night in disguise, mesmerize and tie up the guard and steal diamonds, also bemusing a tiger below the lockers. With the help of the critical teacher- 'the enemy of the kingdom'- and his students and surviving the brainwashing machine, they pull down the king's statue, joined by miners, the king and his courtiers, forcibly brain-washed as well as palace guards, bribed with diamonds. It came at a time when even democratic rulers were becoming somewhat dictatorial. Financed by West Bengal's leftist government, it came to be regarded as an 'out-and-out political' film. When it was shown on Bangladesh TV in 1980, a dialogue ("Pull the ropes, the King will collapse.") appeared all over capital Dhaka in posters and wall-writings and stoked the embers of anti-Ershad struggle, leading eventually to his ouster in 1991.

Until 1976, Ray's films were confined to West Bengal and festivals abroad. Some of them were, of course, commercially released in Bangladesh, London and a few U S cities. Doordarshan had not started showing them yet. *Kapurush-o-Mahapurush*, dubbed in Hindi, was released in the Hindi circuit but did not do well. In 1977, Ray had a desire to enter the Hindi filmworld; the result was *Shatranj Ke Khilari* ('The Chess Players'), based on a story by Munshi Prem Chand. It turned out to be not a Hindi but a full-fledged Urdu film; its dialogue passed over many Hindi-speaking people but subtitled in English, it went well in London. Just before the so-called Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, two *Nawabs* in the court of the king of Oudh, Wajed Ali Shah are so addicted to chess (*Shatranj* in Hindi) that they have no time to understand a political chess game, being played by British mercenaries to annex their territory. They even neglect their wives and keep them sexually starved. In the end, when they fight over a trifle during a chess-play in a village, away from Lucknow, the British troops, led by General Outram, march into the city and take Wajed Ali Shah a prisoner. It begins like a documentary with a baritone narration by Amitabh Bachchan (he did not play any Ray role) but becomes a feature film with marvellous acting by late Amjad Khan as Wajed Ali Shah, Richard Attenborough as General Outram, late Sanjeev Kumar and Saeed Jaffrey as Meer and Mirza- the *Nawabs*, and Shabana Azmi as Meer's sex-starved wife.

A watershed in Ray's film career was his sudden illness toward the end of the shooting of *Ghare Baire* (1983). He had a massive heart attack and was laid to bed. His son, Sandip Ray, trained by him, shot the remaining outdoor sequences. Ray was taken to Houston (USA) for a bypass surgery by the noted cardiac surgeon, Dr. Coolie, who advised him complete rest and a holiday from filmmaking for five years.

Ray had wanted to make a film on Rabindranath's major novel *Ghare Baire*, published in 1915, even before he chose *Pather Panchali*. As early as 1948, he wrote its script and even did some location hunting. A producer was also willing to finance but later backed out. Midway in his career, he was almost doing it but Suchitra Sen, Bengali cinema's leading lady at that time, whom he chose to play Bimala, the wife of the good landlord, did not agree to his condition that she would not act in any other film during its

shooting. A chance to do this long-cherished film came in 1982 when the NFDC agreed to finance it. *Ghare Baire*, which grew in his mind all these 35 years, took a lot of his time and energy. He took infinite pains to collect antique furniture and dresses to make it a flawless period piece. Laborious shooting and music composition devastated his health and on 1st October 1983 he suffered a massive heart attack.

Ghare Baire, the novel, is Tagore's wry comment on the Gandhian call for *Swadeshi* and burning of foreign goods in 1905. In this milieu, the young wife of a popular zemindar of north Bengal is infatuated by the fiery speeches of a *Swadeshi* leader, a friend of her husband who slowly woos her out of her home, to help in their violent struggle but really to make love to her. When she realizes his true motive, it has been too late, because her husband had by then gone out to quell Hindu-Muslim riots in which he was killed, rendering her a widow.

Like the novel, the film also aroused some controversy. Minor departures from Tagore's story irked critics. In Kolkata, it was liked but rated as not quite his best and criticised as too wordy, for being of uneven technical finessé and lacking subtlety in lighting and colour. However, its sombre music, composed by Ray himself, was overwhelming. Like *Charulata*, his 1964 *magnum opus*, he gave *Ghare Baire* a symphonic structure, not Mozartian but Beeethoven's. It has poignant moments, the wife's confession of guilt before leaping flames in the title sequence, her 'sailing' out of home, with her husband, for the first meeting with the ranting *Swadeshi* leader, the wall-clock ticking away to the tragic finalé and her belated realization that under adulterous infatuation, she had driven her husband to death. Ray said, "There's a kind of tension in the film; you know, everything is going to fall apart. That probably prevents people from enjoying it in the way they enjoy *Charulata* which perhaps has more lyricism in it."

After four years of rest (1984-'88), Satyajit Ray was allowed by his doctors to return to filmmaking but avoid outdoor shooting. The result was a documentary on his father and two years later a feature, *Ganashatru*, an adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *The Enemy of the People*, most of it shot indoor. Viewers in Kolkata were irked by its dig at Hindu religious practice of sipping *charanamrita* (concoction of water and milk with which a deity's feet are washed) as unhygienic. Ray denounced the use of religion to cloud scientific truth and to make political capital, which became a dreadful trend in Indian politics in the early 1990s, leading to the demolition of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya and bloody riots in Mumbai and other cities. It was about a doctor's struggle to convince the people of a small tourist town of Bengal that jaundice and other diseases, caused by water-borne viruses, could be due to the taking of *charanamrita*, having water contaminated by leaking sewage pipe. His brother, a city father and a politician, opposes him, being afraid of losing tourist revenue, buys the local press to his side, and isolates him. However, not all is lost; a local journalist takes the doctor's cause to Kolkata press, which serves to warn and educate the people. *Ganashatru* did not do well in Kolkata and abroad as it bore, too obviously, the constraints imposed by its maker's ill health.

A year after *Ganashatru*, his doctors permitted him to shoot outdoor but an ambulance stood by. Wanting to delve deeper into India's endemic corruption, he chose

to film a story he wrote in the early 1960s. *Shakha Prasakha* (1990) became the ageing master's indictment of a widespread Indian vice, corruption. An honest industrialist suffers a stroke during a reception on his 70th birthday in a Bihar town but a doctor saves him by prompt attendance. His three other sons come from Kolkata to see him. He was living with his second son who had lost his memory in a car accident in London but doted on Western classical music. During a week's stay, the eldest and the third brothers fall out and accuse each other of corrupt livelihood. The old man comes to know of this wrangle from a grandchild and is saddened by the generation gap in values but takes comfort in the thought that his second son, though demented, has not joined the unethical rat race.

As a film, *Shakha Prasakha* also appeared simplistic. Ray was accused of being impervious to his time and contemporary issues, which he used to deal with, to the world's applause, e.g. in Kolkata trilogy. The first sequence of introducing the demented son also appeared a little contrived but the film's merits were its outdoor scenes, the liberal use of Western classical music on the sound-track and otherwise.

Ray's last film, *Agantuk* (1991) did better in France than in India. After his death, it was shown in a public hall in Paris where it had a longer run than a French hit, at the time. It was also made on his own story, written many years ago, about an elderly anthropologist who fled from his home in Kolkata to live among the Red Indians and other aboriginals of north and South America. He stays for a week or so with his niece, her husband and their child son (whom he advises not to be a 'frog in the well'), in Kolkata on way to Australia for the next part of his research but is suspected as a fraud, even by his niece's husband. This pains him and makes him leave their house at dead of night for Santiniketan to get some money from a receiver who was keeping his share of his deceased father's inheritance. The Kolkata couple and their son search him out in a Santhal village near Santiniketan and bring him back to Kolkata. While leaving for Australia, he gives a closed envelope to the niece which to her surprise and remorse, contains a fat cheque in which he had given her his share from his father and a short poem in her praise.

Agantuk is somewhat autobiographical, having shades of Ray's own life in it. He even voiced a devotional rhyme in praise of Krishna, sang snatches of a Tagore song and gave his voice in another place, to hint his persona behind the story. He had perhaps a foreboding that he would not live long and wanted to tell Bengalees that they have not quite owned and accepted him. He had remained rather an alien "who would not be known through a passport" but through naive emotional response. It is a delightful film, full of cheer and light-heartedness, of clipping dialogues, a soulful Tagore song and a Santhal dance, with no morbidity, or any other trace of serious illness, which claimed him within a year. He began his film career with the pathos of *Pather Panchali* but ended it with the cheery philosophy of *Agantuk*, as Shakespeare closed his career on the Globe theatre with the light-hearted *Tempest*.

After release of *Agantuk* (1991), suddenly, his cardiac problems returned. He was back in the nursing home where after a protracted swing between life and death, he

breathed his last on 26th April 1992. Next day, his cortège passed through *Nandan*, the government art theatre that he had conceived and named, amid a wave of sorrow in the city and the suburbs, from which thousands came to mourn and attend his cremation. The scene was similar to the funeral of Rabindranath Tagore in 1941, after whom he had been Bengal's most revered cultural icon.

Short Features

During his 36 years' career in cinema, Ray made eight short features, namely *Postmaster*, *Manihara* and *Samapti* (1961, together titled *Teen Kanya*), *Kapurush-O-Mahapurush* (1965, combined under one eponymous title); *Two* (1970, for Esso Children's World Theatre), *Pikoo / Pikoo's Day* (1981, for French Television) and *Sadgati* (1982, for Doordarshan). The three-in-one 1961 film, *Tin Kanya*, is about three Eves- an orphan girl, a tomboy and a childless wife, delineated by Tagore in three of his short stories.

Post Master is about an orphan girl who serves every Post Master in backward village. A young man from Kolkata comes as the Post Master and treats her as his own sister and teaches her the 3Rs. Being unable to stand miseries of life in village and weakened by malaria, he manages a transfer back to the city, leaving the girl in charge of his successor. Sobbing, she accepts her new master. *Post Master* was very well received abroad. It was hailed as 'one of Ray's best films'; even Jean Renoir liked it. The last sequence, - the waif girl ignoring the departing Post Master was deplored by Kolkata critics as a deviation from the original story but pleased Western critics, like Bosley Crowther.

Manihara is about a lonely, childless wife of a trader, who covets ornaments. The trader falls on bad days, which alarms the wife, suspecting that he might sell them to repay a debt. She secretly leaves home for her parent's house but dies in a boat capsize. The husband has a delusion that her skeleton visits him, draped in jewellery.

In the third story, *Samapti* a tomboyish village girl turns into a woman after her unwilling marriage to an eager educated youth from a higher stratum. As it was too long for exhibition abroad; he omitted *Manihara* in *Two Daughters*, as it was spooky and required 'willing suspension of disbelief'.

Two Daughters got the Selznick Golden Laurel Award in Berlin in 1963; the previous year, it received the Golden Boomerang at Melbourne. The third short, *Samapti* got the President's Silver Medal. Along with the Tagore biography, *Teen Kanya* had a rave run in Kolkata and some other cities and was a landmark in the birth centenary celebrations of Rabindranath Tagore. Aparna Dasgupta (Sen later) who became a leading Bengali actress and a gifted director, made her first screen appearance in *Samapti* in the role of the tomboy who is kissed into a wife by her doting husband.

Kapurush-o-Mahapurush ('The Coward & the Saint', 1965) comprises two short features. *Kapurush*, based on a story by Premendra Mitra (also a prolific film director in the 1940s) took up the woman's question again after *Charulata* but from a different

angle. While in *Charulata*, Ray showed the tragic consequence of a married woman's amour for a younger man, *Kapurush* dealt with such a woman's blunt rebuff to a former lover, proposing to elope with him. She would rather cleave to her drunken husband, even without love. However, this strong-willed rebuff does not restore mental peace, as she takes back her sleeping pills from the coward lover who spends a day and a night with them in a north Bengal tea garden. Like *Chiriakhana* (1967), *Kapurush* is Ray's least-liked film and although the latter (with *Mahapurush*) was dubbed in Hindi for all-India release, it did not do well in Hindi circuit. It was perhaps creative fatigue after making so flawless a film as *Charulata* that marred this two-in-one. *Mahapurush* is a light comedy, based on a story of Parashruram (Rajsekhar Bose), depicting a widower lawyer's devotion to a fraudulent holy man, from whose clutches a lover of his young daughter rescues her.

Two, made for the Esso World Theatre, was commissioned by the US Public Television Service. The 15-minute wordless fairy tale shows the encounter between two boys- one from a rich Kolkata family and another from a slum, whom the rich boy sees from his window. They compete with their toys and hobbies; the rich boy flaunts a toy trumpet, a revolver and an air gun; the slum-boy answers with his flute, a mask, a spear and a kite. The rich boy shoots down the kite with his air gun and retreats to play with his robot toys, haunted by the poor boy's plaintive flute. As Ray told Marie Seton, "without the least effort, it says more about war and peace than yards of political analysis". A wordless mysterious ditty, composed by Ray, is repeated hauntingly.

Pikoo/Pikoo's Day 1981 was made for the French TV on the *carté blanc* offer by Henri Fraisse. Based on his story of a child of an affluent Kolkata family, it turned out to be a serious study of moral decay among the urban rich, which was treated fuller in *Shakha Prasakha* (1990). *Pikoo's* young mother has a lover who comes to make love to her in the afternoons when his father is away to office. His wizened grandfather is bed-ridden after a stroke (who dies in the end). His father discovers the adultery but does not dare divorce her. It is an intensely moral film, despite a child being its protagonist. The penultimate sequence when *Pikoo* shouts from the garden to his mother, lying under the 'lover' that he would draw white flowers in black, because he has no white crayon colour, is very moving, and as a critic said, 'a poetic statement which cannot be reduced to concrete terms'. It was shot in Bengali and released as *Pikoo*; the French-subtitled version is called *Pikoo's Day*.

In 1981, Ray approached the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting for permission to make a film about child labour. As it was not granted on the plea that it was prohibited under the Constitution, he decided to make a short film on untouchability for Doordarshan, *Sadgati* ('The Deliverance', 1982), based on a Prem Chand story. A cobbler approaches a Brahmin for doing a small ritual for his daughter's betrothal. The priest asks him to chop off a stubborn log of wood before he went out to perform it. While axing it under a mid-summer sun, he dies of excessive sweat and exhaustion. Coming to know, the villagers revolt but at dead of night, he drags the dead body out of his precinct and purifies himself. It is, as he admitted, 'a deeply angry film'- "not the anger of an exploding bomb but a

bow stretched taut and quivering”. Mohan Agashe who played the Brahmin, told this writer that from the shooting near Raipur (Madhya Pradesh), it appeared as though Ray was making his first film, so intense was his involvement in every bit of it. He would merely indicate the level of performance- to emote or not- and left the rest to the artistes.

Documentaries

In between feature films, Ray also made five documentaries, namely *Rabindranath Tagore* (1961), *Sikkim* (1971), *The Inner Eye* (1974), *Bala* (1976) and *Sukumar Roy* (1987). Like every Bengalee, Satyajit Ray had great admiration for Rabindranath Tagore. His grandfather, Upendra Kishore was a friend of the poet and father, Sukumar an ardent disciple. The poet used to come to their ancestral house in north Kolkata to listen to Upendra Kishore's violin; he also wrote for the family monthly for children, *Sandesh*. When Sukumar Roy was dying of scarlet fever at 28, Rabindranath sang a number of his songs on his deathbed. Satyajit spent two and a half years in the poet's university at Santiniketan, to study fine arts and saw the sage-like poet from a distance. When the poet's birth centenary came to be observed in 1961, he wanted to pay his tribute to Rabindranath. Assigned by the Films Division on Nehru's recommendation, he made a one-hour documentary and a shorter version on the great man-of-letters. He researched in Santiniketan and abroad, collected war footage with great pains from some European museums, scripted, scored music and directed the biographical film; he also himself read the English narration in his baritone voice. It dealt with Tagore's other activities apart from literary, e.g. his anguish over the outbreak of the Second World War and *Jalianwala* massacre. Ray also composed its rich and varied score, using quite a few of Tagore's immortal songs. It received the President's Gold Medal and the Golden Seal at Locarno Festival, both in 1961. He also did a radio biography of the poet for All India Radio with the assistance of a News Correspondent of Kolkata Station, Asim Som in 1961.

Sikkim (1971) was made for the Chogyal before his Himalayan kingdom was annexed by India. Seen by a handful, it is said to be visual poetry on the beauty of Sikkim, of Nature as well as of its people. After China gave up claim on Sikkim in 2003, fresh efforts have been launched by the Ministry of External Affairs to locate the film which is deemed to have been taken by Chogyal's wife, Mrs. Hope Cook to the USA.

The Inner Eye is on his art teacher in Santiniketan, Binod Bihari Mukhopadhyaya; it was homage to the painter who went blind late in life and drew from the 'inner eye', which has been credited to Ray also by Andrew Robinson, his second biographer. Its visual richness came from that of the sketches, frescoes and murals by the Bengali painter. Ray traced the evolution of Mukhopadhyaya's art from his student days at Santiniketan, which did not decline even after his going blind.

Bala is on the renowned Bharat Natyam dancer, Bala Saraswati whom as a boy he had seen to perform in Kolkata way back in 1935. He thought, "*Bharat Natyam* brings out the femininity of a woman, because there's a lot involved in the facial expressions which a ballet doesn't use, certainly not to that extent". He was to make it in 1966 when Bala was

10 years younger. With a limited release, it did not earn much public applause. Its chief attraction is a long, lyrical *varnam* on seashore, revealing the full gamut of her dancing.

Sukumar Roy (1987) is homage to his father who died when he was 2½ years old. During the four years that he was not allowed to do a film by his doctor after his bypass surgery, he made this 30-minute documentary on his father's rhymes, playlets and sketches, also enacting some scenes from his plays for children, rather surrealist in style and content. It was produced by the West Bengal Government and telecast by Doordarshan, Kolkata on 30th October 1987 to mark his father's birth centenary.

Satyajit Ray's talent is so original and multi-faceted that it cannot be fully delineated in the constraints of a chapter like this; on each major film a book can be devoted. Apart from scripting, composing the background score and directing, he often wielded the camera also, particularly after the Apu Trilogy. This led to a misunderstanding with his ace cinematographer, Subrata Mitra who left him after his 13th feature, *Nayak* (1966) and never returned. Initially, he used to look through before a shot was taken but gradually he began cranking himself. This enthusiasm was particularly noticed when foreigners were on the sets. In his later films, after Mitra had left, he was virtually the operating cameraman, leaving the lighting to his latter-day photographer, Soumendu Roy. He used to be present on the editing table also, often from morning to late afternoon. He lent his voice in many sequences and in his last *Agantuk*, even sang snatches of a song. He used to say that everything that he had done early in life helped him to be a filmmaker.

No wonder, in his lifetime, books and articles on, and by, him abounded. Some eight documentaries were made on him by James Beveridge (*Creative Persons: Satyajit Ray*), Adam Low (*Omnibus: The Cinema of Satyajit Ray* for BBC TV), Zia Mohyeddin (*Satyajit Ray: Portrait of a Director*), Melvin Bragg (*South Bank Show: Satyajit Ray*), Shyam Benegal (*Satyajit Ray* for the Films Division), Utpalendu Chakravorti (*The Music of Satyajit Ray* for NFDC), B D Garga (*Satyajit Ray* for the Films Division series, *Creative Artists of India*) and K Vikram Singh (*Satyajit Ray: Introspections*), shot in Ray's Bishop Lefroy Road flat, minutes before he suffered a cerebral stroke in 1983. As the offbeat genre loses steam and gets diluted, his 39 films shine by contrast. In an article in *The Statesman*, Kolkata in 1948 (which in retrospect appears 'programmatically'), "*What is wrong with Indian films*", he had remarked:

"What our cinema needs above everything else is a style, an idiom, a sort of iconography of cinema, which would be uniquely and recognisably Indian."

He himself lived up to this ideal and compelled the world's attention to it. Although India's mainstream cinema cannot claim him, he is central to the Indian cinema's image abroad. As the citation for the award of Doctor of Letters *Honoris Causa* by the Oxford University, to which he was admitted on 21 June 1978 said:

"He evokes the very genius of his country, India, before the eyes of the spectators in these shrines of cinematography so clearly that, to adapt Juvenal (i.85-6): "All that Indians do, their wishes, fears, resentments and pleasures, their joys and goings to and fro... are clearly portrayed."

Six weeks before his death, the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences announced a special Oscar for his lifetime achievement in cinema. A team came from the Academy to present him the coveted trophy in the nursing home. The ceremony, anchored by actress Audrey Hepburn, was live telecast all over the world. Holding the trophy, Ray said, the award meant that after all, his efforts all these years to make better films “have not gone in vain”. The citation said,

“The rare mastery of Satyajit Ray of the cinematographic art and his profoundly humanistic vision have exercised an indelible impression on the directors and the public of the entire world.”

Shortly before his death, the Government of India announced him as the recipient of the country’s highest civilian honour, *Bharat Ratna* (‘The Jewel of India’), putting him on the same pedestal as Jawaharlal Nehru, Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan and Indira Gandhi. His death in 1992 ended an era in the Indian offbeat cinema, which he had practically fathered with his debut, *Pather Panchali*. Lavish praises have been showered on him but none was truer and more telling than the Japanese master, Akira Kurosawa’s:

“Not to have seen the cinema of Ray is like living in the world without seeing the sun or moon.”

FILMS BY SATYAJIT RAY

DIRECTED: Full-length features > 1955: *Pather Panchali*; 1956: *Aparajito*; 1957: *Parash Pathar*; 1958: *Jalsaghar*; 1959: *Apur Sansar*; 1960: *Devi*; 1962: *Kanchanjunga*, *Abhijaan*; 1963: *Mahanagar*; 1964: *Charulata*; 1966: *Nayak*; 1967: *Chiriakhana*; 1968: *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*; 1970: *Aranyer Din Ratri*, *Pratidwandi*; 1971: *Seemabaddha*; 1973: *Ashani Sanket*; 1974: *Sonar Kella*; 1975: *Jana Aranya*; 1977: *Shatranj ke Khiladi* (Urdu); 1978: *Joi Baba Felunath*; 1980: *Hirak Rajar Deshe*; 1983: *Ghare Baire*; 1988: *Ganashatru*; 1990: *Shakha Prasakha*; and 1991: *Agantuk*. **Short Features** > 1961: *Postmaster*, *Manihara* and *Samapti* (together titled *Teen Kanya*), 1965: *Kapurush-O-Mahapurush* (combined under one eponymous title); 1970: *Two* (for Esso, Children’s World Theatre); 1981: *Pikoo / Pikoo’s Day* (for French Television) and 1982: *Sadgati*. **Documentaries** > 1961: *Rabindranath Tagore*; 1971: *Sikkim*; 1974: *The Inner Eye*; 1976: *Bala* and 1987: *Sukumar Roy*

VI. Archetypal Cinema : Ritwik Ghatak

“What has seemed to me a most urgent need is to present to the Bengali people this miserable, impoverished face of divided Bengal, to make them conscious of their own existence, their past and their future.”

—Ritwik Ghatak

In Kolkata, the unexpected rave on *Pather Panchali* did not immediately start a trend, or spawn imitation; only Mrinal Sen and Ritwik Ghatak, almost coevals of Ray, went on making neo-realist films in their own styles. Both were born in East Bengal, carved out of Bengal in the first Partition by Viceroy Lord Curzon in 1905 but re-united in 1911. Parents of both migrated to West Bengal before the second Partition in 1947. The gruesome Kolkata killings of 1946 claimed thousands of Hindus and Muslims until Mahatma Gandhi's call for a halt through his life's longest fast in Belegghata was ultimately heeded by two communities. These traumas inspired Nemai Ghosh, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen to make films on the refugees, settling in West Bengal. They were members of the Communist Party of India and believed in a Marxist Revolution.

Ghatak spent a carefree childhood in riverine East Bengal, whose memories haunted him, all his life. The 1947 Partition came like a guillotine on his sensibility and left an indelible scar. He was seized with a desire to inspire people through plays that he wrote and staged but realized that cinema could reach more people at a time. While reading English literature for M.A. degree from Calcutta University, he became an assistant to Manoj Bhattacharya, then directing a Bengali feature, *Tathapi*. Cinema was in Ghatak's family; an elder brother became a pioneer TV expert and later became a cinematographer with the New Theatres, having learnt movie photography in London. Pramathesh Barua and Bimal Roy came to meet his father, a government officer serving in Rajshahi and Mymensingh in East Bengal, where Ritwik spent a truant childhood. He was brought over to Kolkata for a cure of his truancy by his eldest brother, Manish Ghatak, later a poet writing under the pen name of *Yuvanaswa*, and was admitted to Ballygunge Government High School in south Kolkata. However, he again fled, this time to Kanpur where he worked in a textile mill; he recreated this experience in a short story, *Raja* and later in a film for children, *Bari Theke Paliye* (1959). He was brought back to Rajshahi in 1942, where he became a voracious reader in the District Public Library, took to writing short stories and brought out a short-lived literary magazine, *Abhidhara*.

After graduating with honours in English literature from Krishnanath College, Baharampur in 1948, he came over to Kolkata to do the post-graduate course in the same

subject in Calcutta University but became so engrossed in theatre that he did not go for the final examination. He joined the IPTA and wrote, directed and acted in nine of its plays, notably in Bijon Bhattacharya's seminal play, *Nabanno* ("Nabanno changed my life", he said later.). He also wrote and acted in *Jwala*, *Officer* and in Rabindranath Tagore's *Bisarjan* and translated Brecht's *Galileo* and *Caucasian Chalk Circle*. He set up a group, *Natyachakra* but broke away to join Sombhu Mitra's *Bohurupee* in 1949. In 1951, he took leave of the theatre and jumped into the risky fray of filmmaking, "to completely shake thousands of people, through it". "I came to cinema for this", he wrote later in 1969, "not for merely filmmaking for its own sake. If a better medium comes up tomorrow, I shall kick out cinema".

An early member of the IPTA, he came naturally under the influence of European and Japanese neo-realist films, shown in Kolkata in 1952 Festival and by the Russian film delegation, led by Cherkasov and Pudovkin. They whetted his desire to make 'socialist' films with political purpose. He was also influenced by Sergei Eisenstein's silent masterpieces- *Battleship Potemkin*, *Strike* and *Ivan the Terrible*. Apart from Ray, he admired Pramathesh Chandra Barua (1903-1951) as a director, particularly his so-called 'subjective' camerawork in his two films, *Grihadaha* (1936) and *Uttarayan* (1941). He helped Nemai Ghosh make, and also act in, *Chhinnamul* (1951), a stark and poignant film on the exodus of 'uprooted' Hindus from East Bengal in 1946-'47, using actuality footage for a planned documentary. The experience led him to make his debut, *Nagarik* (1952-'53) which found no distributor in his lifetime. Growing ideological differences led to his parting of ways with the IPTA and forming his own unit, 'Group Theatre' in 1954, inspired by Stanislavsky's experiments in Moscow. Open criticism of the undivided Communist Party of India (CPI) led to his expulsion in 1955.

In 1952, Ritwik wrote a script for a Bengali film, *Bedeni* on the gypsies but after 20 days' outdoor shooting gave it up, because of a camera fault. In frustration and being invited by Sasadhar Mukherjee, founder-proprietor of Filmistan, Ghatak went over to Mumbai where he wrote the stories and scripts of Bimal Roy's *Madhumati* (1958) and Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Musafir* (1957) - both Hindi. Until his death in 1976, he wrote scripts of 17 feature films for other directors, of which only nine were released. He also acted in small roles in six feature films, including three of his own- *Subarna Rekha*, *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* (in two roles) and *Jukti, Takko aar Gappo*.

He came under the influence of, and believed in, Freud's disciple, C G Yung's theory of 'collective unconscious' and looked for the so-called 'archetypes' in Bengali racial memory to lend to his films an elemental timeless appeal. In an interview to *Movie Montage*, 1967, he said,

"The theory of collective unconscious revealed that man carries in his brain images that were born long before civilization...The collective unconscious has been ruling our lives at every step, in our social manners and mores, in our thought and speech, in our prayer, in our work, in our likes and dislikes."

Films will have to be made in "an idiom which will not say much, [will be] in itself

suggestive and not burdened by allusion but will have, nevertheless, a full edge, a language which is not loaded with reference but which reminds". He found this idiom in the prose of Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, a 19th century Bengali savant, of Abraham Lincoln and of the Bible, in the poetry of the *Upanishads* and in the films of Flaherty and in Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon*. The language in which he described the birth of this idiom is rather esoteric.

"This idiom is born in the white heat of inspiration, which eludes professional filmmakers, turning out film after film. It is forged in the smithy of the souls of non-professionals who do not speak out except under dire necessity. This archetypal idiom cannot come unless one is very angry, very much in love, very much in joy or very much in sorrow, and has to be in one's unconscious."

In 1969, when he wrote this from a mental asylum where he was being treated for recurrent schizophrenia, he had behind him six feature films, made in his ten most creative years. He wanted to make 'archetypal' films from almost the beginning of his career. Writing on 22nd February 1955 to his newly wed wife, Surama from Ranchi where he was then shooting *Ajaantrik*, he described the elemental joy of living, despite grinding poverty, among south Bihar tribals, like Oraons and Mundas, their lilting music and dance and their lively womenfolk. More such letters, published in her Bengali memoir, *Ritwik* (Asha Prakashan, Kolkata, 1977) abound with reveries on the 'poetry of the earth' and an abiding faith in Marxist revolution. The first mention of 'archetype' occurs in a letter in 1960 after the release of *Meghe Dhaka Tara*:

"From this film, though a bit sentimentally, I began throwing overtones and using mythology. This was a universal theme through which I have tried to spread myself into the tradition of eight centuries of child marriage, in which an eight-year girl has to embrace a new milieu with pain, which is caught in our folk literature, sheds itself in *Agamani* and *Vijaya* songs, and is manifest in Great Mother archetype."

When the self-effacing working girl, Neeta, born on the *Jagat Dhatri* ('Great Mother') *Puja* day, contracts tuberculosis, caused by the stress of keeping a large family afloat, the lament of Parvati's mother in *Agamani* song; 'Uma, come to my lap!' is played on the sound-track. Neeta yearns for the Himalayas, the abode of Lord Shiva and his consort, Parvati's parents. She is admitted in a TB sanatorium in Darjeeling, as if to return her to her father.

Behind this quest for 'archetypal cinema' was his anxiety to lend to his films a 'universality of nuances' so that they transcended political and other barriers, because as he said, there were people in every country 'wanting to bathe in pure beauty'. In spite of box-office failures of many of his films, the idea never left him. As an avid reader, Ghatak's special interests were Buddhism, archeology and later, Yung's psychology of Collective Unconscious, yielding archetypal themes. He took cinema to be a ritual, similar to Hindus' going to a temple, Christians' going to a church and Muslims praying in a mosque.

“Film-going is a kind of ritual; when the lights go off, the screen takes over. Then the audience increasingly becomes one; a community feeling comes over them, which is like going to church or masjid or temple.”

Ghatak made his debut in cinema, *Nagarik* (‘The Citizen’, 1952) on his own story. A young man of Kolkata roams about in the city for a job in early 1950s. His fiancé hopes, he will get one soon, marry her and build a house. His family lives in a dark, damp house in a dingy lane, on his father’s pension. His mother toils the whole day, shouting and screaming. A sister is deaf and dumb, also illiterate and black; no boy likes to marry her. Days roll on; their poverty deepens. A front room is let out to a student who does not pay rent but glances at the mute girl. When he gets a job outside Kolkata; the girl offers to marry and go with him but he feels confused and leaves her. His fiancé loses faith in his ability to get a job; his pessimistic father falls seriously ill and hurls abuses at him. In anger, he goes out but when he returns, he finds him dead. Unable to stay any longer in the lane, the family moves to a slum.

Ajaantrik (‘The Unmechanical’, 1957) on a story by Subodh Ghosh is about a taxi-driver’s abnormal passion for his vehicle, a ramshackle 1920 Chevrolet, as if it was a living being and a friend; the car too seems to respond to his endearments. He plies it in south Bihar among tribals and fondly calls it *Jagaddal*. After many episodes of ferrying passengers and communion between him and the vehicle, the taxi breaks down. Desperate to put it back on road, he buys new spares, impoverishing himself. For a test drive, he loads boulders and takes it to a hill but it does not start. In despair and savage anger, he smashes its window-screen and breaks into a sob. A scrap-dealer buys it for a song.

The archetypal theme of renewal was symbolised by a wayside lunatic, throwing away an old bowl to grab a new one and a child blowing the dismantled horn. The film was a box-office failure in Kolkata but became his best-known film in Europe. “I made a mistake by not expressing the story through commonly understood images”, he said later, “but I had no other means because of the theme and the background and therefore, had to remain esoteric and far from universal”.

Two years later came his next film, *Bari Theke Paliye* (‘The Runaway’, 1959) on a story by Shibram Chakavorty, a punster writer. To escape his father’s caning, an adventure-loving village boy runs away to Kolkata, hiding in a train. He goes through many experiences in the city, both good and bad and eventually returns home to his father’s forgiveness, saying “there’s no place like home”. Ghatak’s own childhood truancy gave the film an authentic touch.

Next year, came his best-known and loved film, *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (‘Cloud-capped Star’, 1960) on a story by Shaktipada Rajguru. A refugee girl in a colony, Neeta (played superbly by Supriya Choudhury) does a part-time job to support a large family. His elder brother practices classical music with dedication; she supports him, hoping that he will become a great singer, some day. She secretly loves a boy who has gone out of the colony to become a scientist. He also seeks Neeta’s financial support to continue

research, which she gives. Increasing needs force her to give up study and take a full-time job in an office, in addition to some tuitions after office-hours. Her father, a teacher in a local school, collapses on a rail track. Another brother gives up study and works in a factory. Her lover secretly falls for a sister and both announce their marriage, breaking her heart; stoically, she helps in preparation of their marriage. Under-nourished, she passes through many other stresses and contracts tuberculosis. Her singer brother gets a job in Mumbai and returning home, takes Neeta to a sanatorium in Darjeeling. She gets news of everybody else's zest for life from him during his visits and cries out, "I also wanted to live". She fades to death but girls like Neeta reincarnate to sacrifice their lives for others' welfare. *Meghe Dhaka Tara* remains his most moving film, which he never surpassed.

Komal Gandhar ('E-Flat', 1961), also on a story by him, came next year. Two touring drama troupes are in competition; one is led by a fiery young man, Bhrigu; the other by a woman, Shanta. Looking for artistes for a play about uprooted migrants to West Bengal, Bhrigu accepts Shanta's daughter, Anasuya (another superb performance by Supriya) who is eventually attracted to him. He divulges that her mother broke away from his troupe just before a show with some followers to launch her own. Anasuya proposes a joint production of Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* but her mother does not cooperate. Bhrigu's troupe stages a play with Anasuya in a role in a border town near Padma river that flows between West and East Bengal. Standing on its bank, Anasuya discovers an emotional affinity with Bhrigu, both hailing from East Bengal and traumatised by the Partition. The joint play is eventually staged to a meagre audience owing to Shanta's secret sabotage, wasting resources of Bhrigu's unit. The bankrupt group, full of dissension, makes it up with a very successful production in another town. Anasuya has a lover in France but gradually through many other episodes, she is finally united with Bhrigu. *Komal Gandhar* dealt with the archetype of daughters, estranged from parents, treated in classical plays like Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

Subarnarekha (1962), named after a turbulent river of south Bengal, is woven around the archetype of the 'Terrible Mother', the reverse of the 'Great Mother', who unleashes destructive forces. It is most tellingly felt when frisking alone on a deserted wartime airstrip, a teenaged refugee girl, Sita suddenly comes upon an 'apparition' of Kali, the goddess of destruction, presented by a begging chameleon. She grows up amid grinding poverty and after many misfortunes, ends up in a brothel. Her moment of horror comes when her own brother, estranged since crossing the border and equally buffeted by many frustrations, visits her as a 'customer'. Shocked by this, she slits her throat with a kitchen knife; the equally shocked brother hangs himself to death.

Ghatak shed his obsession with the ill effects of the 1947 Partition in these three films- *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Komal Gandhar* and *Subarnarekha*- indisputably his best. Their stories are different but a common theme runs through them, in some variations- displacement of thousands of people from their hearths and homes, their struggle to eke out a living in refugee colonies in West Bengal and outside and the economic ruin of once 'Golden Bengal' that the division brought about. It fell like a guillotine on his sensibility.

“The partition of Bengal had caused many upheavals in our economic and political life. ...I have never been able to accept the partition, not even today. And in three of my films I have tried to say just that. Quite unintentionally, they formed a trilogy- *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Komal Gandhar* and *Subarnarekha*. When I started with *Meghe Dhaka Tara* I did not talk of political unity....What hurt me most was that cultural unity too was impossible to achieve and there were political and economic factors involved in the problem. *Komal Gandhar* clearly speaks of this cultural unity. *Meghe Dhaka Tara* too expresses the same feeling at a deeper level. So does *Subarnarekha*.”

After *Subarnarekha*, Ghatak made no feature film for 11 years from 1962; he could complete three documentaries and six shorts. His alcoholism increased and his recurrent bouts of schizophrenia saw him in and out of hospitals. Poor box-office returns and illness brought him no producer. He took up the post of Vice-Principal and Professor of Film Direction in the Films & Television Training Institute in Pune in 1966 and in just one year, made a short, *Rendezvous* and a documentary, ‘Scientists of Tomorrow’, apart from grooming students like Kumar Shahani and Mani Kaul.

He returned to Kolkata in 1968 but a feature film he began, *Ranger Ghulam* in 1968 remained incomplete. He could complete two documentaries and two shorts until his next feature, *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* in 1973. In 1972, he started a documentary on Indira Gandhi (whom he admired very much) but could not complete it. His other unfinished films are *Bedeni*, *Kato Ajanare*, abandoned at the final stage in 1959, *Bagalar Banga Darshan*, abandoned after a week’s shooting in 1965.

His last two films- *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* (‘A River Named Titas’, 1973) and *Jukti, Takko aar Gappo* (‘Argument & a Story’, 1974), made during a lucid period, went even further in esotericism and subjectivity. Soon after the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, Mujibar Rehman’s government invited Ray, Sen, Ghatak and other creative artistes of West Bengal, who were born in erstwhile East Bengal, for felicitation. When their aeroplane flew over Padma, Ritwik sobbed like a child, remembering his boyhood in East Bengal. This nostalgia made him agree to direct *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam*, based on an epic novel by Advaita Mallavarman and produced by *Pran Kathachitra* of Dhaka. He soon realised that there is nothing left of his childhood Bengal and two Bengals can never re-unite. The making of *Titas* etc. enabled him to hark back to the land of his birth, which he shot it with great zest, often in rains and knee-deep water and completed it in high fever. After shooting the last sequence, he fell unconscious and had to be hospitalized in Dhaka.

In *Jukti Takko aar Gappo*, he played a filmmaker and laid bare the wound in his psyche. It conformed to the popular opinion about him that he could be a great filmmaker, if he gave up alcohol and overcame frustrations. Rambling in style, this overtly political film ridiculed the loss of human values in leftists and extremists. Enacting the filmmaker’s death sequence, after being hit by a police bullet, he mutters, before collapsing: “One has to do something, has to do something”.

Two years after thus enacting his own death, Ritwik died in Kolkata's S.S.K.M. hospital in penury and privation, like another great Bengali novelist, Manik Bandyopadhyaya. Tales of his drunkenness and eccentricities were rife in the industry and among the intelligentsia of Kolkata. He used to say that only two Bengalees knew filmmaking- "one is an egotist (referring to Ray) and the other an alcoholic". His often-futile attempts for making films of his kind, despite alcoholism, poverty and disease, gradually undid him. Schizophrenic attacks and tuberculosis in the end hastened his death in a Kolkata hospital at the age of 51 years on 7th February, 1976. Touching tales go about his last pathetic years, wasted by penury, madness and disease. Unscrupulous producers and distributors got his signature on dubious deeds over liquor, complicating the copyrights of his films.

Not many in Bengal could see his films having brief commercial runs while he lived; some could not even be released. Creatively his most fecund and lucky period were six years-from 1957 to 1962- in which came his five major films- *Ajaantrik*, *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Bari Theke Paliye*, *Komal Gandhar* and *Subarnarekha*. Except *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, none of his films had a long run in Kolkata but after his untimely death, his fame rose, Phoenix-like, in Bengal and abroad. *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* was released in Dhaka in 1973 and *Jukti, Takko Aar Gappo* had a brief run in Kolkata. For common cine-goers outside West Bengal, he is perhaps still merely a name.

A year after his death in 1977 and 25 years after it was made, his debut *Nagarik* was released in Kolkata, almost as a historical curiosity. Because of knotty distribution rights and re-censor problems, partly his own creation, seven of his eight completed feature films were confined to cans. His filmmaker son, Ritaban has compiled a documentary with excerpts from his unfinished films, which show his mastery in various aspects of filmmaking.

Interest at home and abroad in his films is revived from time to time and a Retrospective was held in London during the India Festival in 1982. Many more retrospectives have since been held in other European capitals and in film festivals in home and abroad to lend him a status next to Satyajit Ray in Bengali offbeat cinema. Seeing *Nagarik* in a private show, Ray had remarked that if it was released in 1952, Ghatak, *not* he, would have been the pioneer of Bengali offbeat cinema. Ray gave him a long tribute in a memorial lecture after his death, which deserves quoting in length.

"Ritwik's films have a special character....All of us have been, to some extent, influenced by Hollywood films. But for some mysterious reason, Ritwik was totally free from this influence; there is no impression of Hollywood on him. If one talks about influences, I think one can find some influence of Soviet films on Ritwik's works. But that influence does not mean imitation, because the main virtue of Ritwik was his distinctiveness, his originality and this he maintained till the end. He had in him this influence of Soviet films, and of theatre in the dialogue, content and conclusions of his films. And these two elements were based on what was very much rooted in the soil of Bengal. Ritwik was a Bengali director in heart and soul, a Bengali artist- much more of a Bengali than myself."

His Views

Like his filmmaking style, Ritwik Ghatak's views on his and others' films as well as on his time were very original, as in excerpts under.

"A truly national cinema will emerge from the much-abused form of melodrama, when truly serious and considerate artists will bring the pressure of their entire intellect upon it. ... Without commitment to contemporary reality, to the daily acts of heroism in that reality, no important work can be created. [Filmic] art does not consist merely of ambitious subjects or outlandish propositions, or the extensive use of a newly available extremely wide-angle lens. It does not consist also of montage and manipulation of filmic time and de-dramatization solely. Rather, it lies in bursts of fancy. ... [Film language] would speak briefly, without ornamentation; that it would be inherently expressive without the weight of allusions but with sharpness on edge- a language whose images are archetypal, a language which is vigorous, catching at every mood in a patriarchal manner, a language that is apparently dry, like a subterranean river and succulent like a ripened mango."

FILMS BY RITWIK GHATAK

DIRECTED: Features > 1952: *Nagarik* (released in 1982); 1958: *Ajaantrik*; 1959: *Bari Theke Paliye*; 1960: *Meghe Dhaka Tara*; 1961: *Komal Gandhar*; 1964: *Subarnarekha*; 1973: *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam*; 1974: *Jukti, Takko Aar Gappo*; **Short Films** > 1962: *Scissors*; 1965: *Fear, Rendezvous*; 1970: *Amar Lenin, Yeh Kaun?*; 1971: *Durbargati Padma*; and **Documentaries** > 1955: *Oraon: Adivasiyon ka Jeevan Srot, Bihar ke Darshaniya Sthan*; 1963: *Ustad Alauddin Khan* (uncredited); 1967: *Scientists of Tomorrow*; 1970: *Puruliar Chhou Nritya*. **ACTED IN** > 1950: *Tathapi*; 1954: *Chhinnamul*; 1964: *Kumari Mon, Subarnarekha*; 1968: *Sansar Simantey*; 1973: *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam*; 1974: *Jukti, Takko Aar Gappo*. **SCRIPTED (others' films)** > 1955: *Musafir, Madhumati*; 1960: *Swaralipi*; 1962: *Kumari Mon*; 1963: *Dwiper Naam Tiarang*; 1965: *Raj Kanya*; Drafted scripts for *Sei Bishnupriya* (1974), *Princess Kalavati* (1975) and *Lajja* (1976). **INCOMPLETE/ABANDONED FILMS** > *Bedeni* (1951), *Kato Ajanare* (1959), *Bagalar Bangadarshan* (1964), *Ranger Golam* (1968), *Indira Gandhi* (documentary, 1972), *Ramkinkar* (documentary, 1975)

VII. Marxist Ethos and Beyond: Mrinal Sen

The filmmaker has to be an agent-provocateur- one who disturbs the spectator and moves him to action...Like Truffaut, I believe in a kind of planned violence.
—Mrinal Sen

For some two decades, Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen commanded the heights of Bengali offbeat cinema, both in home and abroad. Few of their films, except those in Hindi and other regional languages, were shown commercially outside Bengal but the Western as well as the global image of good Indian cinema was formed not only by Ray's but many of Ghatak's, Sen's and Benegal's films too. Mrinal Sen made 30 feature films in four Indian languages-Bengali (20), Oriya (1), Telugu (1) and Hindi (8), including two telefilms for Doordarshan. He also made two documentaries and wrote the scripts of two features by others- *Joradighir Choudhury Paribaar* by Ajit Lahiri and *Kanch Kata Hirey* by Ajoy Kar.

Sen graduated with honours in Physics from a Kolkata college in 1942 and for the next five years, was an active member of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), the cultural wing of the Communist Party of India (CPI). Initially, he wanted to be a sound-recordist in Tollygunge, Kolkata's film centre but outdated technology and archaic filmmaking atmosphere in the studios and laboratories repulsed him. He took to reading and writing on cinema aesthetics as well as reviewed films. His middle-class upbringing, comparable to Ghatak's, his faith in Marxism and membership of the CPI led him to depict in cinema the travails of this class. He was an assistant to the Silent Era veteran, DG (Dhiren Ganguly) for a while and watched Ghatak shoot *Ajantrik* in Ranchi. He pooled some resources and made *Raat Bhor* about a village boy's disillusion in an alien city, which ran in Kolkata for only two weeks. Unlike Ray's debut, *Raat Bhor* had no mark of excellence, or a shadow of his potential; to him it was 'an aberration', like "a decent man suddenly going to a prostitute".

Disheartened, he took to medical salesmanship and toured central India, tormented, all the while, by a desire to return to filmmaking. He gave up the job, came back to Kolkata to make his second, and the first successful, film, *Neel Akasher Niche* ('Under the Blue Sky') in 1959. Keen absorption in the theories and practices of cinema gradually matured him. His early faith in communism gave a new shape to his essentially Bengali middle-class outlook. Nehru's ironic slogan, *Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai* ("Indians and the Chinese are brothers") had caught on with the people after Chinese Premier Zhou-en-Lai's visit to India in 1954 and India signing *Panchsheel* with Beijing. *Neel Aakash*

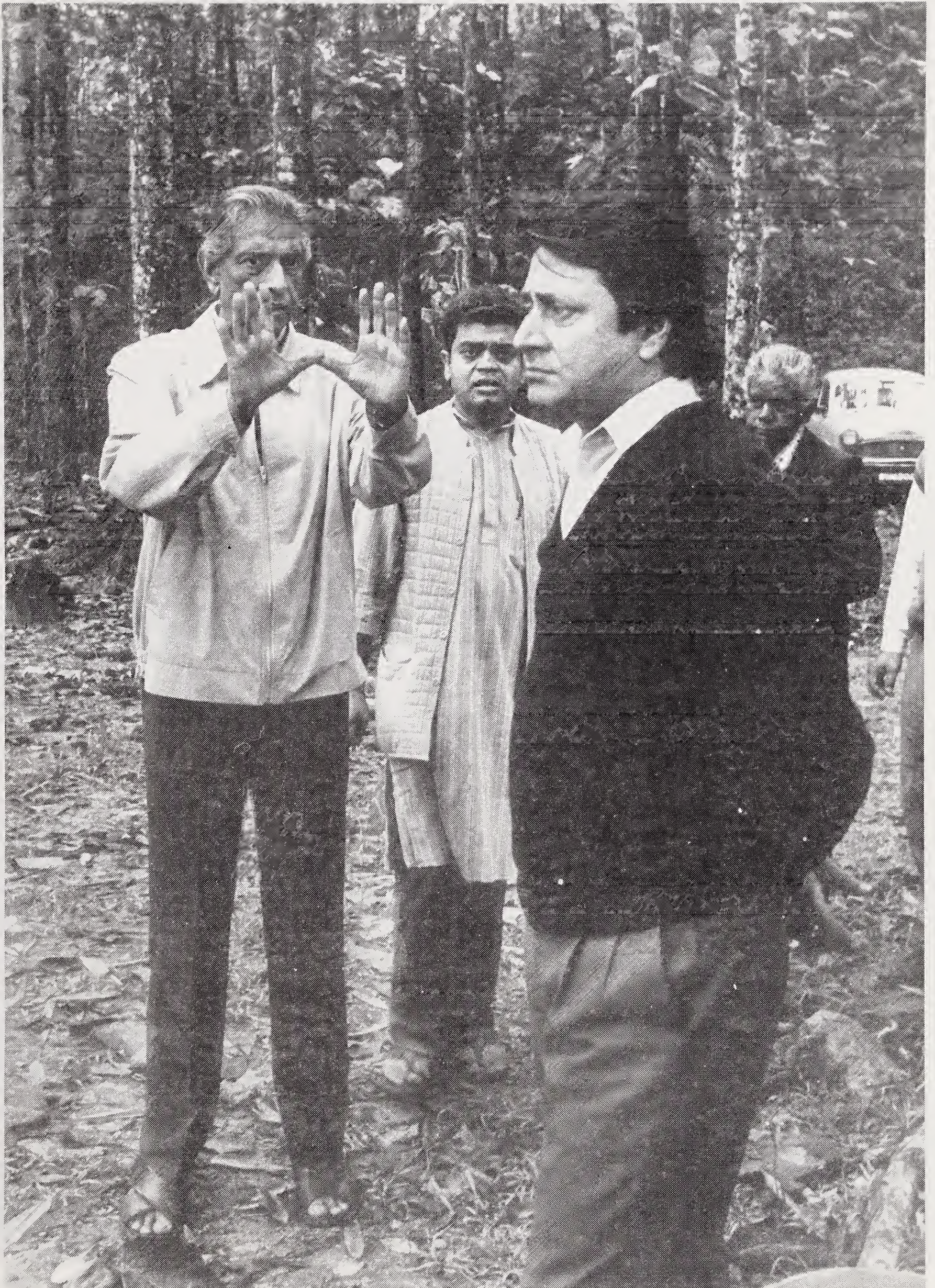
Niche, which was about a domiciled Chinese hawker's life in Kolkata, went well in this short-lived ambience of fraternity with China before it attacked India in 1962 and annexed a part of north-east, claiming it as its territory. It evinced a better grasp of the film medium than *Raat Bhor* and had a moderate box-office success. He infused his political belief in it and even today he "stands by its political content"; it was his first fumbling essay in 'political cinema'. Nehru liked the film but the central government banned it, curiously, for two months in 1965, three years after the Sino-Indian conflict.

Mrinal Sen's art and craft made a quantum jump, next year (1960) in his third feature, *Baishe Shravan* ('The Wedding Day'). A naïve young couple's relations turn from sweet to sour in the shadows of the Bengal Famine (1942-'43), on which Ray made *Ashani Sanket* ('The Distant Thunder') in 1973. It began with a poetic treatment of the amours of the couple, the husband a young railway hawker, son of a former *zamindar* and the wife, a pretty village belle (Madhavi Mukherjee). Events take a morbid turn when the husband suspects her fidelity and breaks his leg by falling from a running train. Sen made *Baishe Shravan* in a fluid style with a rambling narrative, like Ray's *Pather Panchali* and Ghatak's *Ajaantrik*, but soaked in sentimentality. He had apparently imbibed the good influence of Ray's four films before this, particularly of the Apu trilogy.

Gradually, however, there came in Sen a self-conscious style until it became loud and obtrusive in films like *Aakash Kusum* (1965), *Interview* (1971), *Calcutta-71* (1972), *Padatik* (1973), *Mrigaya* (1976) and *Parashuram* (1978). Under the influence of French *Nouvelle Vague* directors- Godard and Truffaut, his style transformed from a usual linear narrative (upto *Pratinidhi*, 1964) to a spiky gimmick (upto *Parashuram*, 1978). The deep social concern and Marxist ethos of his early films helped create a new genre of 'political cinema'- of which he became the most ardent pioneer.

His next three films- *Punashcha* ('Over Again', 1961), *Abasheshe* ('And at last', 1962) and *Pratinidhi* ('Representative', 1964) - all on man-woman relations- bore the marks of creative fatigue, as it were. The theme of male chauvinism and the conflict it generates in married couples, which was first dealt with in *Baishe Shravan*, returned in *Punashcha*. It was about an urban housewife's social hurdles in becoming a working woman, on which Ray made a better film, *Mahanagar* ('The Big City') in 1963. It was followed by two ordinary films, lacklustre in form and content. *Absheshe* (1963) was, as he said, a 'farce on divorce, Indian style' and *Pratinidhi* dealt with a young man's marriage with a widow running into a rock over a child by the previous husband.

Then came *Aakash Kusum* ('Up in Clouds' 1965), his most sensational film. It ran well in Kolkata, its novel techniques startling viewers but Ray denounced it as 'spiky syntax'. Ritwik Ghatak had by then made his three masterpieces- *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Komal Gandhar* and *Subarnarekha* and Ray a dozen features, climaxed by *Charulata*, paving the way for a full-blown Indian 'New Wave'. On this upbeat scene, *Aakash Kusum* burst with a bang with its spree of freeze-shots (as in Francois Truffeaut's in *Jules et Jim*, 1961), jump cuts, deep focus and shots taken with hand-held camera. A middle-class young man of Kolkata does well in business and woos the daughter of a rich industrialist by telling lies about himself. The girl comes to know the truth which breaks



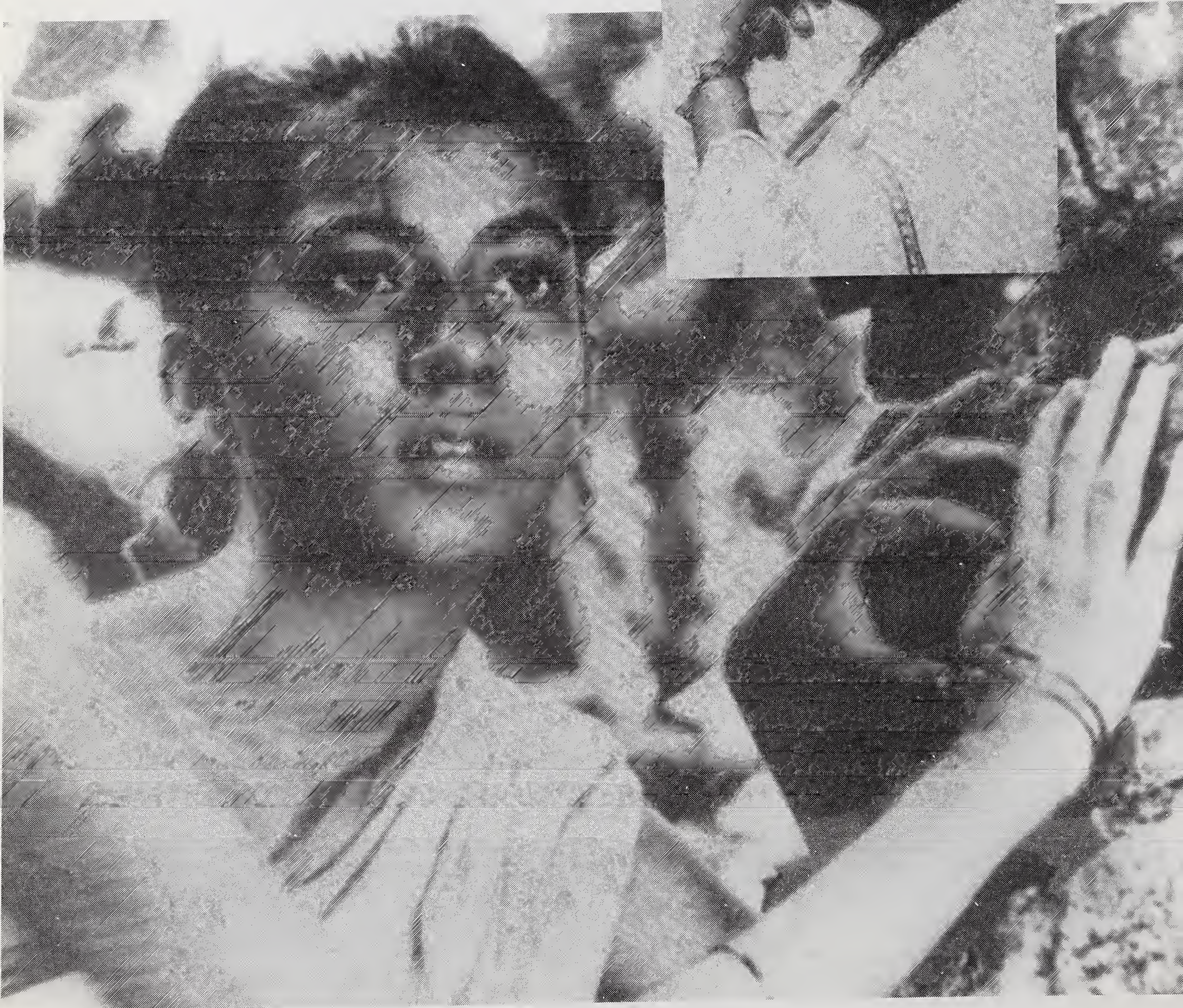
(Late) Satyajit Ray: One of the foremost legendary Directors of India's offbeat cinema during one of his creative moments



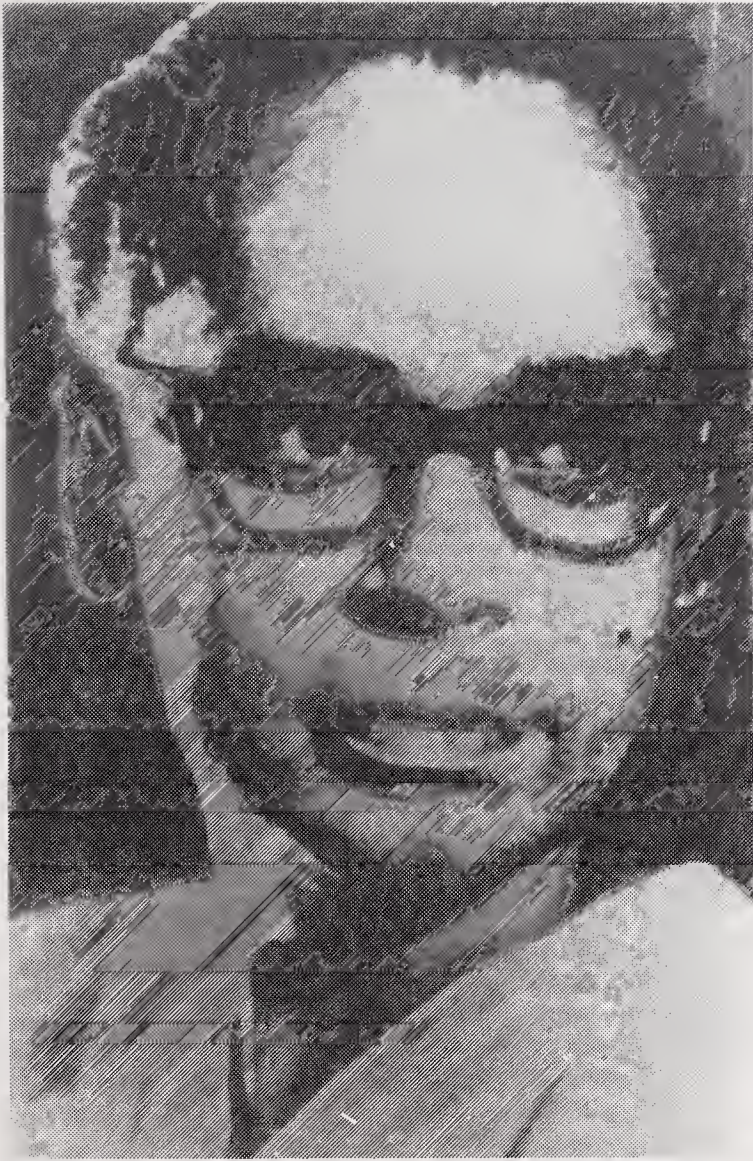
A still from Baburao Painter's *Savkari Pash* (Marathi) :realistic portrayal of plight of peasants



A poignant scene from the classic *Do Bigha Zameen* (Hindi) directed by Bimal Roy (inset)



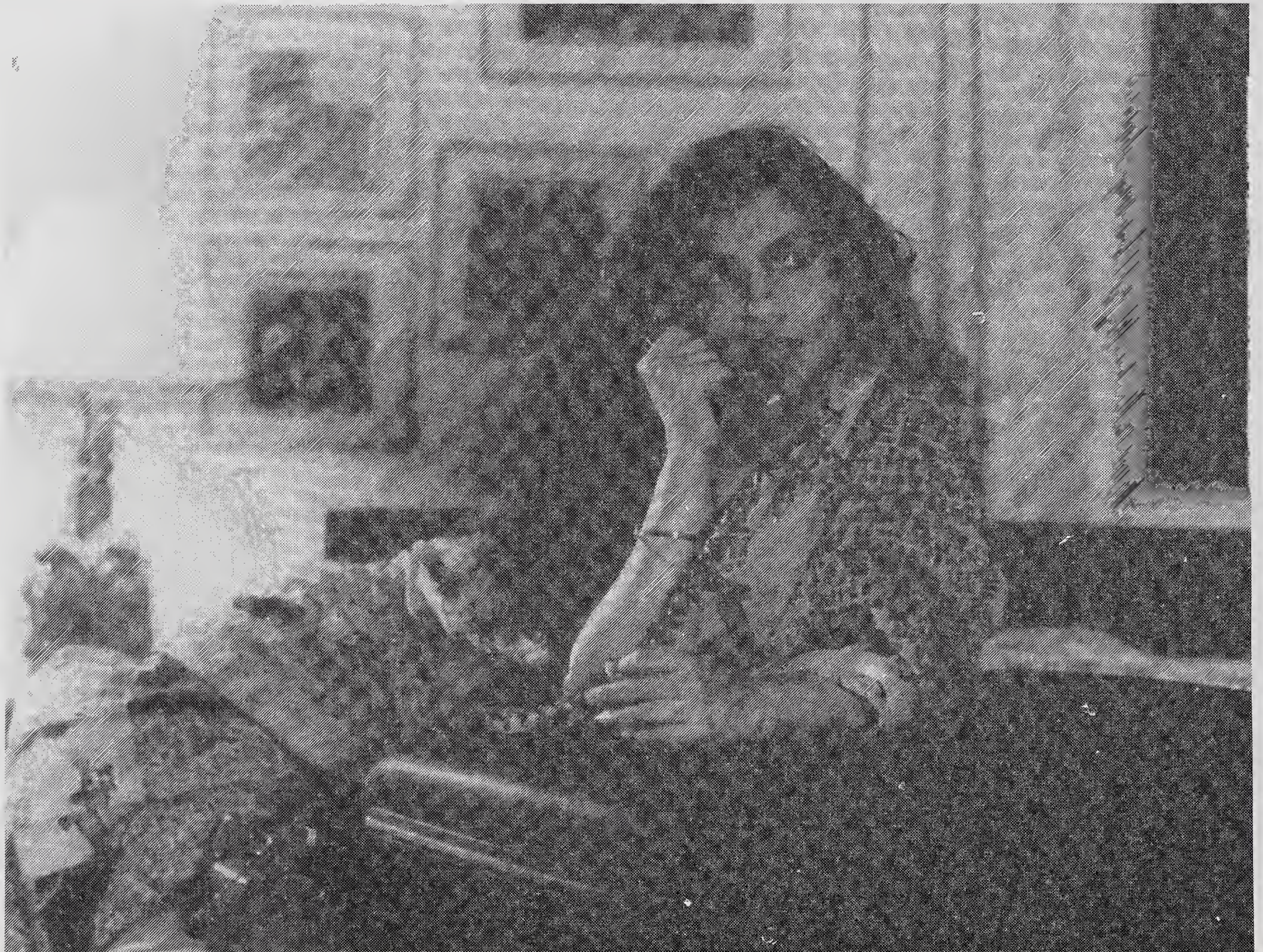
A scene from *Pather Panchali* (Bengali); landmark offbeat film by Satyajit Ray (above right)



Maverick film director Ritwik Ghatak (top) and a scene from his film *Jukti, Takko Aar Gappo* in Bengali (above)



Stills from versatile film Director Mrinal Sen's masterpieces in Bengali : *Interview* (above) and *Antareen* (below)

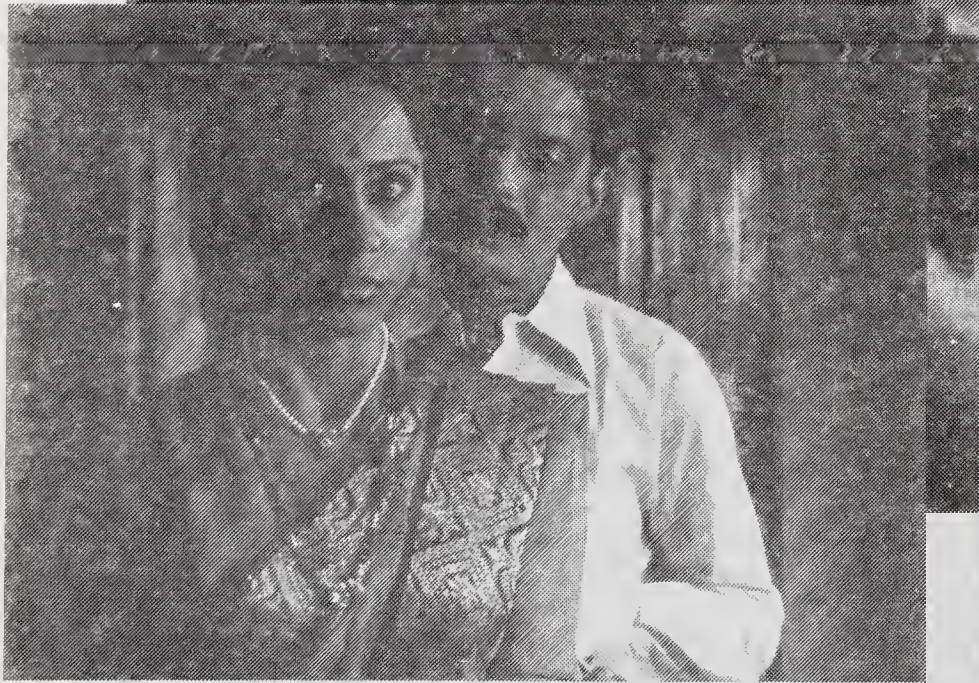




A still from *Chemmeen* (Malyalam) directed Adoor Gopalakrishnan



A scene from the classic *Bhuban Shome* (Bengali) directed by Mrinal Sen



Film Director Shyam Benegal (top) : Living legend of India's offbeat cinema; scenes from his outstanding Hindi films *Bhumika* (above left) and *Mammo* (above right)

her heart and infuriates her father. They come heavily on him, returning him to the bottom of the social ladder. Sen emphasized the class-distance and class struggle and suggested, Marx-like, that “to be de-classed is to survive”.

More engaging than the film was the controversy it generated, mainly between Sen and Ray, which brought out their diverse cinematic views. Ray wrote a letter to the Editor of *The Statesman*, Kolkata apropos the film’s review in September 1965, tearing the film and its novel technique to pieces. He questioned the topicality of its theme and called it ‘a crow-film with a contemporary moral’, and *a la* Jean Luc Godard, added pungently: “A crow-film is a crow-film is a crow-film”. Sen and the writer of its story, Ashish Burman jumped into the fray with a deluge of letters, stoking the embers of controversy-often acrimonious. Many cineastes and readers also joined, filling the ‘Letters’ columns for some two months till the Editor rung down the curtain on the debate, unseemly but unique in India’s usually one-way cinema journalism.

Early in his career, Mrinal Sen used to lament the poor response to his films, even in Kolkata but he was not upset, as he considered cinema a ‘specialized art’, requiring a ‘specialized’ (not necessarily elite) audience. This goaded him to make films in other Indian languages too, aspiring for a wider exposure. In 1966, he took up an offer of a Cuttack production company, *Chhayabani Pratishthan* to film a popular Oriya novel of 1930s, *Matir Manisha* by Kalindi Charan Panigrahi. When the Second World War had shattered the economy, two brothers fall out over the use of their ancestral land, the elder objecting to the younger brother’s demand for partition. He shot it in Orissa, infusing, *a la* Godard, a documentary element and departing substantially from the novel, for which he came under severe criticism in Oriya press. He equated the master of a Hindu joint family with the government, which poor people perceive as riding roughshod over their well-being.

In the next three years, Sen made no feature film; After *Matir Manisha* (‘Two Brothers’, 1966) he only made a documentary, *Moving Perspective* in 1967. After idle years had recharged his imagination, he got an offer to make the most popular of his films, *Bhuban Shome* which besides being an unexpected box-office hit, became a seminal film in the Indian offbeat genre, ushering in a kind of ‘wave’ well upto the 1990s.

After *Bhuban Shome* came another downward curve in Sen’s career. He made three insipid films- the first, a short feature for children, *Ichchapuran* (‘Wish Fulfilment’, 1970), *Interview* (1970) and a feature in Hindi, *Ek Adhuri Kahani* (‘An Unfinished Story’, 1971). *Ichhapuran* on a Tagore story was made for the Children’s Film Society in Bengali, Marathi and Hindi. It was a fantasy tale of a father and his delinquent son, who under the boon of a Hindu goddess, transpose their ages and fulfil their wishes, very comically.

Interview (1970) is the first of his three films about life in Kolkata- together often called ‘Calcutta Trilogy’; *Calcutta ’71* (1972) and *Padatik* (1973) are the other two. An unemployed young man goes for an interview for a job but misses it for not wearing a suit. After he goes through many other mishaps and frustrations from dawn to dusk; he

can no longer contain his pent-up anger; he smashes a garment shop showcase, flaunting a mannequin wearing a suit and a tie. It also turned out to be a political film, a criticism of India's colonial hangover, persisting even 23 years after freedom from British rule. He called for an armed resistance to colonialism overtly, not only in India but wherever colonial legacy persisted, just as the Vietnamese were then fighting the decade-long American aggression. It also had a novelty of technique, using collage and newsreels and an argument between the jobless young man and a voice, representing the audience. Sen called it an allegory on the colonial legacy of the British.

Ek Adhuri Kahani, based on a Bengali story by Subodh Ghosh, is about confrontation between the owner of a sugar-mill and its workers. In 1929, when the economy took a downturn, the owners of a sugar-mill in Bihar cut the wages of workers, forcing them adopt various means to survive. They end up, perpetrating violence against the management but their struggles do not end. Their battles against various odds, meanwhile, sap their souls.

More than Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen was distressed by the turmoil in Kolkata from the late 1960s to early 1970s, over a spate of killings by young extremists and police encounters with them. West Bengal experienced an upheaval, first in a tribal belt in Naxalbari subdivision in Darjeeling district in the foothills of eastern Himalayas, and then almost all over the State. Some party members broke away from the CPI (Marxist) and inspired by Mao Ze Dong's experiment of Cultural Revolution in China, secretly motivated bright young students in colleges and universities to work for an armed revolt against the three 'class enemies' of the poor- the police, usurers and landlords- with the help of peasants and workers.

In youth, Sen was a fire-brand; he had gone to a police lock-up as a boy for joining a *Vande Mataram* procession and while in college took part in Quit India Movement of 1942 and in frenzied burning of trams for fare increase in Kolkata. He was emotionally roused by this turmoil and his next film, *Calcutta-71* burst with a bang on this explosive time. In prestigious *Metro* cinema-hall of the city, it ran for months. Sen was excited and saw straws in the wind for the coming Revolution but was also 'confused' by the three-way split in the Communist Party. He said, the turmoil was due to Bengalees' 'nostalgia about the past and uncritical attitude towards the present'. "Ours is the history of continuing poverty and exploitation, running through ages.", he added.

The unexpected success of *Calcutta-71* made him bold to do away with the narrative, or the storyline; he began treating the film as a pamphlet and became, so to say, 'an essayist on celluloid'. He mixed bits of reality in the form of a collage and made more daring innovations in technique than in *Aakash Kusum*. He took three episodes, occurring ten years apart, written by a major Marxist novelist, Manik Bandyopadhyaya. The first was a night of rains in 1933 in a Kolkata slum where dwellers lived with animals. The second, set in 1943, was about a lower middle-class family and its crisis of values in a changing society. The third story, set in 1953, dealt with some teenage boys forming a gang to smuggle rice, eluding the police, to feed their families. Through these three stories of three decades ran the common theme of exploitation and deprivation, leading

inevitably to Kolkata of 1971 when young people, swearing a revolutionary political ideology, took to killings of so-called exploiters- the police, landlords and money-lenders. The three stories thus merge to give a cohesive image of confusion and panic that gripped Kolkata from the early 1970s because of extremist violence.

The film became a bit phoney but it chimed with the rebellious mood of the time. He said later that in *Calcutta-71*, he wanted to be not only an 'essayist' but an iconoclast in form also, seeking to replace the usual narrative with a collage form by 'putting together fragments of physical reality'. "The energy and faith behind this film were certainly political, and I have tried to elucidate our past as well as to understand the future *politically*.", chiming with Thomas Mann's famous saying: "In our times, the destiny of man presents its meaning in political terms". It was acclaimed in Venice in 1972, where a German reviewer for *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* compared it to a pamphlet and described its maker as 'politically committed', seeing in the film the influence of Jean Luc Godard. Sen went one step further and proclaimed that henceforth, he would treat cinema as a 'propagandist's pulpit' and 'a preacher's medium', not, however, at the cost of 'artistic or emotional validity'. In an interview in 1973, he said:

"There is need for a bit of madcap in Indian cinema; this is lacking a great deal. We advance many aesthetic arguments to keep status quo and preen on 'Indianness'.... It is very necessary to free the weapons of cinema from the shackles of Establishment."

If *Bhuban Shome* was his most popular, theme-wise, *Calcutta-71* was his most sensational film. He threw box-office compulsions of average Bengali films to the wind in his next, *Padatik* ('The Guerilla Fighter', 1973), the third film of his Kolkata trilogy. A political extremist escapes from police custody and goes underground where a 'liberated' woman, living in defiance of the middle-class social mores, gives him shelter. In this, Sen questioned the policies of the Communist Party and alleged flaw in leadership, making the film a direct political comment. In his next, *Chorus* (1974), he took his new film form a step further by juxtaposing stylisation and caricature of the imperfect reality and made a direct address to viewers, like Charlie Chaplin in *The Great Dictator*. The subject was unemployment, which Ray treated more tellingly in *Jana Aranya* in 1975. Sen gave it an allegorical form by setting the story in heaven where gods create a hundred jobs for which young people on the earth queue and fight.

This deliberate discarding of the narrative in *Chorus* cost him dearly. The film flopped and made him return to story-telling in *Mrigaya* ('The Royal Hunt', 1976), two years later. Gay abandon made way for a sober recreation of the stirring resistance in 1901 by a young and brave *Santhal* (a tribe) hunter to the British exploitation of forests. In this also, Sen emphasized his pet themes of oppression and revolt. Return to the narrative and Mithun Chakravorty's debut performance in the role of the intrepid *Santhal* hero made it a box office success also.

Acquiring confidence in making films in Oriya and Hindi, Mrinal Sen now turned to make a film in a south Indian language. Munshi Prem Chand's story *Kafan* became in Telugu *Oka Oorie Katha* ('A Tale of a Village') in 1977. Sen gave Prem Chand's

story about moral decadence of the upper class and exploitation of the poor a deep poignance. *Oka Oorie Katha* is the first overtly political film in Telugu, exposing the social system that impoverishes the landless labour. Prem Chand's story was set in north Indian rural milieu but as poverty is ubiquitous in India, Sen adapted it to an Andhra village. A madcap peasant refuses to work for the well-off people in the society, as he believes, "to work in this rotten system is to serve it". His son marries a young labourer girl but when she dies during childbirth, the father and the son go berserk to collect money for her cremation. With the collection, they leave her uncremated and squander it on drinks and merry-making.

Although aesthetically, it was one of Sen's best films, *Oka Oorie Katha* was not very well-received in Andhra Pradesh. Its dialogue sounded unnatural and common people did not share Sen's understanding of rural Andhra. Gradually from this film, the artist in Sen returned to assert over the essayist, giving up restless adaptations of French 'New Wave' forms of Godard and Truffaut. His zest and lyricism returned in moving sequences, as one of a marriage-procession, the kind that Keats saw on a Grecian Urn and of the chase by the tribal boy of his newly wed wife who eludes him, giggling. Justifying deviations from Prem Chand's story, *Kafan* in making *Oka Oorie Katha* (1977), he wrote:

"Cinema has to live not in competition with literature but in reconciliation; this way it can retain its character and find its place among the arts. This would, of course, apply only to literature-based films...This reconciliation should not be confined to the format of cinema only; it has to be with time also and in consonance with three loyalties of the film-maker, -to the theme, to the medium (of cinema) and to the time he lives in."

However, his obsession with politics returned in *Parashuram* ('The Man with the Axe', 1978), next year in which he exposed, in a rather documentary manner, the life and ethos of Kolkata's slum-dwellers. A rural migrant to the city moves among them with an axe and only in fantasy and dream, revolts against the authorities and fights petty criminals. The eccentric migrant is meant to be the modern variant of the *Mahabharata*'s low-caste warrior, Parashuram who avenged his father's death by axing the Kshatriyas 21 times. It was a phoney allegory; no wonder, the film had little box-office success.

Sen had admitted having been influenced by Dostoevsky. In films like *Baishe Shravan*, *Aakash Kusum*, *Kharij* and *Oka Oorie Katha*, one discerns shades of the great Russian novelist in clinical analysis of human misery and its socio-political causes, although he came nowhere near Dostoevsky's religious concerns and dilemma. His films from his next, *Ek Din Pratidin* ('And Quiet Rolls the Day', 1979) became rather Dickensian in minute details and depicting stark realism in basic human relation with pity and irony. He gave up delivering overt political messages and became a subtler chronicler of familiar situations and milieu.

In this disquieting film about a middle-class working girl not returning home from office one evening, he tried, like Satyajit Ray, to 'see the universe in a drop of dew'. *Ek*

Din Pratidin is a subtle parody of the so-called 'petty bourgeois' class- their prejudices, fears and attitudes 'in an economically desperate situation'. From this film, Sen turned inward, believing that man's enemy was more within than outside- in the society, politics, or whatever.

In next two films, however, his Marxist predilections returned. *Aakaler Sandhane* ('In Search of Famine', 1980) combined a novelty of form ('filmmaking within film') with a moving theme- perennial hunger in rural Bengal. A director goes with his unit to shoot a film on the Bengal Famine of 1942-'43 in a remote village where it was severest but the protests by poor villagers who see themselves in the film, make him give up shooting and return to Kolkata.

In *Kharij* ("The case is closed!", 1982) and *Khandahar* ('The Ruins', 1983) Sen returned to making tragedies, long after *Baishe Shraavan*. *Kharij* is a minute study of social and personal reactions to the unnatural death of a servant boy who, while sleeping beside a burning coal oven in a chilly night, dies of carbon monoxide poisoning. The incident sends the householder and his wife on a soul-search but when the distraught father of the boy arrives from a village, they treat him as hailing from a lower class.

Khandahar, based on a story by Premendra Mitra, is about a young woman, forced to live amongst the ruins of a palace to give succour and company to her blind mother who lives on the hope that her friend's son would, some day, come to marry her. A city photographer, who had come to snap the ruins and stays near, is taken to be the promised groom by the mother but he cannot marry the desolate girl. *Khandahar* does arouse tragic emotions and a quiet rage against relegating women to the home alone.

His next feature, shot in Rajasthan with great fanfare, *Genesis* (1986) is an allegory with Biblical overtones. Two unlettered young men, escaping from a deluge, take shelter in a deserted human habitat and live by weaving and farming. A Sikh trader supplies them food, essential commodities and some yarn for weaving. He comes occasionally to collect the cloth, woven by one of them and sell it in a distant market. A dumb and distraught young woman, who has lost her husband in the deluge, roams about. The two men spot her in the ruins and make her live with them; gradually, the three by their hard work vastly better their condition. Inevitably, the two men make love to her and she conceives, not knowing whose child she is bearing. Her confession of pregnancy makes two men claim the unborn child and get into a nasty fight. The Sikh trader returns with a camel-borne horde, destroys their huts and builds a factory at the site. It has not been released commercially but was shown once only on Doordarshan on 30th April 1994. It is a rather self-conscious film but the sound track has telling silent stretches. The sequences of a merry village fair, the woman on the swing and of the two men coming out one night, hearing anklet bells of a woman but finding none, are touching cinematic episodes.

Sen has made four more films- *Ek Din Achanak* (1988) in Hindi, *Mahaprithivi* (1991), *Antareen* (1993) and *Aamar Bhuban* (2003) in Bengali. *Ek Din Achanak*, produced jointly by the NFDC and Doordarshan, was about the sudden disappearance of an elderly and respected professor, leaving his family, ruminating on the reasons that might have led to this unexpected act by so responsible a person. His wife and daughter

reconstruct the man from their experiences. It starts, like *Ek Din Pratidin*, with the sudden deviation of a family member from his daily routine and then through flashbacks, builds up the missing person.

Mahaprithivi ('The Vast World', 1991) deals with the tensions in a Bengali middle-class family of Kolkata, when momentous events happen abroad. Communism collapses in the USSR and two Germanys unite. The elderly mother accuses the husband and a son of not having done anything to save another son and dies by hanging, leaving a diary that her husband, youngest son and a mentally unbalanced daughter dare not read. Two days later, the eldest son returns from Germany and perceives the disorientation in the family, caused by political developments across 25 years. The diary's contents are revealed in flashbacks with also a clip from his *Calcutta '71*. In anger and frustration, the daughter burns the unread diary. It is a philosophical film, seeking to explore, how momentous events in world history impinge on the lives of individuals, living far away.

Antareen ('The Last Recluse', 1993) is, like *Khandahar*, a study of loneliness of a woman, living alone in a palace, her solitude relieved only by random telephonic talk with a writer who comes to stay in an adjacent solitary house to complete a novel. Their conversations lead to a kind of sensual game in which they indulge with fantasies. The lonely woman- it is not clear whether she is unmarried or a divorcee- is like the young woman in *Khandahar*, imprisoned in her own morbid life. Thus, themes and patterns recur in Sen's films, lending them some homogeneity and familiar resemblance.

Sen made no film for nine years after *Antareen*. While receiving an honorary degree from Jadavpur University in Kolkata in June 1999, he said, he had no desire to make any, as he had "lost faith in humans, human decency". In a cynical vein, he added, "Life, politics, society, culture are all at a crisis; the world is poisoned." However, the protracted communal carnage in Gujarat in February 2002 stirred him out of his cynicism and next year, he set about making his 30th feature, *Aamar Bhuvan*. Based, like many of his films, on a story by a little-known writer, it is about a poor Muslim carpenter's return from an Arab country, flush with funds, after ten years. His divorced wife (Nandita Das) had meanwhile married a poor cousin brother of him and gave birth to three children. His return with a lot of money excites the village and through a skein of events and episodes, he is reconciled with his estranged wife.

Mrinal Sen has been more involved with his time than Ray and occasionally made public protests. He made an open protest in print against a proposed joint police strategy to 'liquidate' extremists in five Indian States. Later in life, he was disillusioned about the brand of Marxism, practised by Indian communist parties. From *Ek Din Pratidin* (1980), he also gave up leaving a political message. Like millions of people all over the world, he did not like the US-aggression of Iraq in February-March, 2003. In a letter to *The Statesman*, Kolkata (17 April), he asked if it was really for liberating the Arab country. "I for one shall call it aggression, pure and simple, aggression of the fascist kind, aiming at nothing but wanton destruction and killing of life and property minus the country's oil reserves." In a felicitation by West Bengal Government in Kolkata on his

80th birthday on 14th May 2003, Sen said, his faults always haunted him, because . “I know in my heart, where I have gone wrong. I wish, I were younger to rectify all those mistakes I have made in my films. But that is what makes me sad.”

His Views

Sen defines cinema ‘a communication through camera’, determined by the physical properties of optics and sound. It is necessary for an honest filmmaker to experiment, and not conform to the practices of predecessors. He told a French interviewer, Michel Ciment in Paris in 1982, “In the state in which India finds itself, it is not sufficient to be a humanist”. The world, he says, is shrinking and no language or art should remain exclusive to a people or a race. He thinks, films should be able to ‘connect’ the people and their cultures with one another and their makers should regional problems as universal. In lectures and seminars, he preaches for ‘connecting’ the past with the present, and not looking at it merely as an archival or archeological preserve. He believes, people have to develop a taste for better films, because mindless mainstream films have corrupted them. Cinema to him is also a ‘mode of reaction’ to the fast-changing world around and a filmmaker should be “committed to the reality around him”. He favours minority audience for films like his own but as it cannot sustain films like his, he urges filmmakers to try in other languages too, to reach a larger audience. Unlike Ray, Sen departed from his script a great deal during shooting, because he believes in ‘constant growth’ of a script. He finds hope for good cinema in the ‘aggressive infiltration’ by documentary-makers into feature filmmaking. He believes, “what is disparaged as gimmickry today would be a valid technique tomorrow; therefore, none should discourage experimentation and say- thus far and no further”.

FILMS BY MRINAL SEN

DIRECTED Features> 1956: *Raat Bhor*; 1959: *Neel Akasher Niche*; 1960: *Baishe Shravan*; 1961: *Punashcha*; 1962: *Abasheshe*; 1964: *Pratinidhi*; 1965: *Aakash Kusum*; 1966: *Matira Manisha* (Oriya); 1969: *Bhuban Shome* (Hindi), 1970: *Ichhapuran, Interview*, 1971: *Ek Adhuri Kahani* (Hindi); 1972: *Calcutta '71*; 1973: *Padatik*; 1974: *Chorus*; 1976: *Mrigaya* (Hindi); 1977: *Oka Oorie Katha* (Telugu); 1978: *Parashuram*; 1979: *Ek Din Pratidin*; 1980: *Aakaler Sandhane*; 1981: *Chaalchitra*; 1982: *Kharij*; 1983: *Khandahar* (Hindi); 1984: *Tasveer Apni Apni* (Hindi, for Doordarshan); 1986: *Genesis* (Hindi); 1987: *Kabhie Door Kabhie Paas* (Hindi, for Doordarshan); 1988: *Ek Din Achanak* (Hindi); 1991: *Mahaprithivi*; 1993: *Antareen*; 2003: *Aamar Bhuban*.

Documentaries > 1967: *Moving Perspective*; 1982: *Tripura Prasanga*; 1990: *Calcutta, My Eldorado*; **SCRIPTED**> 1966: *Joradighir Choudhury Parivaar* (by Ajit Lahiri), *Kanch Kata Hirey* (by Ajoy Kar).

VIII. Ripples before the 'Wave'

"Any film which has a sensible theme belongs to the new genre."

—Mrinal Sen

Pather Panchali became a benchmark offbeat film, initially in the Bengali, and later in other offbeat cinemas. A kind of offbeat wave rose after Sen's *Bhuban Shome* and Mani Kaul's *Uski Roti*, both released in 1969, not so much in quality as in number. Inchoate offbeat urges manifested in a handful of directors, making so-called 'middle cinema' between *Pather Panchali* and *Bhuban Shome*, e.g., K.A. Abbas, Satyen Bose, Ramu Kariat, Bimal Roy, B.N. Reddy, Rajen Tarafdar, Bhupen Hazarika, Basu Bhattacharya, Hrishikesh Mukherjee, Devaki Bose, Hemen Gupta and K. Balachander.

Ripples in South

Ramu Kariat, who made the first successful neo-realist Malayalam film, was born in a peasant family of Chettuvai in Trichur district. His parents wanted him to be a doctor but he opted for journalism. His real break came with his fourth, *Chemmeen* (1965), based on a widely read story by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai. It introduced Malayalam film with a bang outside Kerala with music by Salil Chowdhury; Mumbai's 'best cutter', Hrishikesh Mukherjee edited it and Marcus Bartley wielded the camera. *Chemmeen* in Malayalam means 'shrimps' that abound in the Arabian Sea, off the Malabar Coast and are lifeline to numerous fishermen. In this backdrop, a fisherman's daughter falls in love with a Muslim youth. They meet a tragic end after a sexual intimacy without marriage, which is attributed to violation of the moral code, enshrined by *Kadalamma*, the local sea goddess. Besides winning the President's Gold Medal for being the best feature film of 1965, *Chemmeen* got a Certificate of Merit at Chicago Festival, 1967. In Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai and Delhi, it was a huge success for its exotic seascapes and passionate love scenes. Kariat made five more films, upto 1978 before his early death on 10 February 1979. (More on him in Chapter XV)

Born in a village near Guruvayur, near Kochi in 1924, **P Bhaskaran** entered Malayalam cinema as a lyricist at 24. Giving up college, he joined the Leftist movement and went to jail, several times. After a two-year stint with All India Radio: Calicut as a writer, producer of plays and a lyricist, he got a chance to co-direct, and act in, a feature film with friend, Ramu Kariat, *Neela Kuyil* adjudged the best Malayalam film of the year. It dealt with untouchability and unmarried motherhood. His second film, *Rarichan Enna Pauran* (in which Ramu Kariat did a small role) drew its story from a novel by Uroob. A widow employs an orphan in a teashop, whom her daughter treats with

affection. A groom's father demands high dowry for her marriage; to everybody's surprise, the boy arranges the amount just in time to get her wedded. It transpires afterward that he had stolen the money to repay the affection, showered on him by her and the widow; he is arrested.

His 1967 film, *Irrutinte Aatmavu* ('The Heart of Darkness', 1967) is truly offbeat, being about a mentally retarded youth whose erratic behaviour makes most people treat him as a mad man; only his uncle's daughter fawns on him. When she is married off to an old widower, he rushes to the wedding hall and tells his tormentors: "Chain me up; I am mad". It was adjudged the best film of 1966 and got a national Award for 'Best Social and Moral Purposes'. It is considered Bhaskaran's best film in a career spanning 30 years from 1953. He made another offbeat in the same year; *Anveshichu Kandatiyilla* ('Sought but did not find', 1967) was about a woman's unsuccessful search for happiness. Adapted from a war story, it was about a girl, born eight months after marriage, which makes her father reject her. She becomes a nurse and while on duty during the Second World War, falls in love with a captain who is killed. She returns home and has an affair with a person who turns out to be a married man. Disillusioned, she returns to the hospital where she began as a nurse.

Bommi Narasimha Reddi (1908-1977) made films very different from the common run of Telugu films, treading the path of neo-realism from his very first, *Vande Mataram* in 1939. Born in a farming family in Cuddappah district in 1908, Reddi took a course in performing arts in Tagore's Santiniketan out of love for Bengali theatre and cinema. After completing it, he returned to Chennai and became a scriptwriter for H M Reddy. He wrote the script of *Grihalakshmi* (1937) and learning rudiments of filmmaking, launched his own Vauhini Pictures and Vauhini Studio in Chennai in 1946, which later became the famous Vijay-Vauhini. He dealt with social issues and problems, like dowry and unemployment (*Vande Mataram*), widow remarriage (*Sumangali*, 1940) and pre-marital sex (*Devta*, 1941). During the 1950s and 1960s, Reddy made six films, *Bangaru Papa* (1956), *Bhagya Rekha* (1957), *Raja Makutam* (1959), *Puja Phalamu* (1964), *Rangula Ratnam* (1966) and *Bangaru Panjaram* (1968) - all for his Vauhini Pictures. The President honoured him with *Padmashri* and later Dadasaheb Phalke Award for lifelong devotion to Telugu cinema.

In Tamil cinema, **K Balachander**'s first film, *Neer Kumizhi* in 1965 was nearly offbeat; his next *Edhir Neechal* (1968) was also different from the run-of-the-mill Tamil cinema. He took to filmmaking in 1965 and has since directed over 60 films, sometimes up to four in a year, and in as many languages- Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Hindi. His creativity also swung between making a highly commercial film, like *Ek Duje Ke Liye* (1981) and a rousing political satire, like *Thanneer, Thanneer*, in the same year.

Offbeat tendencies were seen in Malayalam films, like *Padatha Painkili* ('The Parrot That Never Sings', 1957), *Randidangazhi* ('Two Measures of Paddy', 1958) and *Adhyapika* ('Lady Teacher', 1968) by P Subramanyam and *Unni Archa* ('Loving Archa') by Kunchako in 1961, *Bhargavi Nilayam* ('Abode of Bhargavi', 1964) by A

Vincent, *Kaavya Mela* ('Poetry Festival', 1965) by M Krishnan Nair, *Odayil Ninnu* ('From the Gutter', 1965) by K S Sethumadhavan and *Kavalan Chundan* ('The Race Boat', 1967) by Sasikumar.

In Mumbai

K A Abbas (1914-'87) made seven films in this period, of which *Shahar Aur Sapna* ('The City & the Dream', 1963) on his own story and produced by his own company, *Naya Sansar* on a low budget, was distinctly offbeat. It won the President's gold medal, was acclaimed at Karlovy Vary in 1964 and received an Academy Award, the same year. A village boy comes to Mumbai for a living, stays in an unused sewage pipe where a waif girl has been living before him. After initial fracas, they fall in love and eventually marry. Both dream of having a house of their own, which they cannot buy or build. Abbas's other films- *Char Dil Char Rahen* (1959), *Gyara Hazar Ladkiyan* (1962) *Hamara Ghar* (1964), *Aaswan Mohan* (1965) and *Bombay Raat Ki Bahon Mein* (1967)- were realistic too, in his typical journalistic style.

Bimal Roy, who settled in Mumbai from 1951, made no other film as off beat as *Do Bigha Zameen* (1953) but continued to make significant Hindi films. In the year of *Pather Panchali* (1955) came his superhit, *Devdas*; three years later, he made, to almost equal success, *Madhumati* (1958) on a story and script by Ritwik Ghatak. Many of his subsequent films were equally popular, e.g. *Yahudi* (1958), *Sujata* (1959) and *Bandini* (1963). *Sujata* dealt with the theme of untouchability, based on a story by Subodh Ghosh; the sensitive score and lilting songs were by Sachin Dev Burman. *Bandini*, whose music was also composed by S D Burman, was based on a real-life Bengali story by a former jailor, Charu Chandra Chakravarty writing under the pen name of *Jarasandha*. A sympathetic jailor explores the psyche of a highborn woman who is sentenced for committing a crime, unintentionally. It was Roy's last great film before his death on 7th January 1966 at the age of 58.

Basu Bhattacharya's first, *Teesri Kasam* ('The Third Oath', 1966) cut across the divide between 'offbeat' and 'mainstream'. Raj Kapoor left one of his finest acting in the role of a bullock-cart driver who falls madly in love with a visiting *nautanki* dancer (Waheeda Rehman) but cannot consummate it, as she cannot give up her profession. Its lilting songs, written by Shailendra and Hasrat Jaipuri and sung playback by Mukesh, Asha Bhonsle and Lata Mangeshkar, became all-time hits and are still very haunting. *Teesri Kasam* was a countrywide sensation and won the President's gold medal for the best film of 1966. Bhattacharya made another amazingly low-budget (less than one lakh rupees) offbeat film, *Uski Kahani* ('Her Story', 1967) with totally outdoor shooting and amateur cast and crew.

In Mumbai, **Hrishikesh Mukherjee** was also making very original and out-of-the-way films and by 1969, had directed and edited (he used to be the 'best cutter in Mumbai') as many as 14 feature films. Of these, akin to offbeat were his first, *Musafir* (1957), *Anari* (1959), featuring Raj Kapoor and Nutan and winning the President's award

for Best Hindi film, *Anuradha* (1960) with music by Ravi Shankar and *Mazhli Didi* (1967) on Sarat Chandra's story.

Films by two eminent directors of Mumbai, who ended their careers in this period- **Guru Dutt** (1925-1965) and **Mehboob Khan** (1909-1963) tended to offbeat. Five Guru Dutt films were released during this period- *Mr. and Mrs. 55* (1955), *Sailaab* (1956), *Pyasa* (1957), *Kaagaz Ke Phool* (1959) and *Saheb Bibi Aur Gulam* (1962). While a student in Uday Shankar's Dance Academy at Almora, he assisted him in making *Kalpana* (1948). Soon afterward, he joined the Prabhat at Pune to learn filmmaking. After making six indifferent films for Dev Anand's *Navketan*, *Pyasa* ('Eternal Thirst') shot him to instant fame. He himself acted in this film, having shades of his own life and dealing with unrequited romantic love and a masochistic self-pity of a film director. He made his next, *Kaagaz Ke Phool* ('Paper Flowers') in cinemascope on a similar theme but it was not as popular. His next film, *Saheb Bibi Aur Gulam* ('King, Queen & the Joker') in 1962 was, like *Pyasa*, an instant success. It was about the lonely wife of a drunken *zeminder* in the backdrop of feudal decay in Kolkata, based on a best seller Bengali novel by Bimal Mitra. The failure of *Kaagaz Ke Phool* rankled and compounded with his personal problems, led him to commit suicide by an overdose of sleeping pills in 1965.

Mehboob's last two films- *Mother India* (1957) and *Son of India* (1962) were also different from Mumbai's ordinary films. *Mother India* was a remake of his *Aurat* (1940) with Nargis in the title role; it has become an icon of popular Indian cinema. A brave, toiling peasant widow passes through many misfortunes and in the end, kills one of her sons for being unworthy of the society.

In Kolkata

In Kolkata, **Tapan Sinha** made his debut, *Ankush* in 1954 and in next 15 years, directed as many as 16 feature films, some of which tended to be offbeat. These were *Kabuliwala* (1957) on a well-known Tagore story (which, apart from two national awards, got a prize at Berlin for its music by Ravi Shankar), *Louha Kapat* (1958) on jail inmates, *Kshudita Pashan* (1960), a fantasy based on Tagore's *Hungry Stones*. His other significant films were *Hansuli Banker Upakatha* (1962) on a riverine tribe, based on a novel by Tarashankar Banerjee, *Nirjan Saikate* (1963), *Jatugriha* (1964), *Arohi* (1964), which besides getting the national award for Best Bengali film of the year, won a prize at Locarno festival for its 'humanism'. Also popular were *Atithi* (1965), also on a Tagore story, winning a Certificate of Merit from the President and the Venice Festival and *Haatey Bazare* (1967) on a doctor's crusading zeal against social stigma, which received the President's Gold Medal and a trophy at the Asian Film Festival in Cambodia.

Some Bengali films of **Hemen Gupta** were nearly offbeat. Before making his debut, *Dwanda* (Bengali) in 1943, Gupta was a freedom fighter and twice went to jail. He drew on his experiences of Quit India movement of 1942 in '42 (*Biyallish*) which caused a sensation on release after being held up by the Censor Board for over two years. Satyajit Ray praised it and another film, *Bhuli Nai* (1948), also on Freedom

Movement. "The films evinced originality in theme and the spirit of patriotism that runs through them; it was essentially the director's own, and not something derived, which touches the viewers in spite of their general technical drawbacks".

Rajen Tarafdar was an art director in a foreign advertising firm in Kolkata but resigned, like Ray, in 1958 after making his first film, *Antariksha* ('The Sky'), the previous year. His second film, *Ganga* (1960) on fishermen living on the banks of the holy river in West Bengal, was a rave for its exotic riverine scenery and striking music by Salil Chowdhury. He kept his promise in next three feature films- *Agnisiksha* (1962), *Jiban Kahini* (1964) and *Akash Chhoan* (1968) and although not quite offbeat, they evinced an unmistakable urge for realism.

Tarun Majumdar, whose films cannot truly be called offbeat, made eight films from his 1959 debut, *Chaoa Paowa* to 1967 hit, *Balika Bodhu*. His films are the best of 'middle cinema' with engaging stories and good songs, often *Rabindrasangeet*. His other successful films in this period were *Smritituku Thaak* (1960), *Kancher Swarga* (1962), another hit, *Palaatak* (1963) and *Aalor Pipasa* (1965). *Balika Bodhu*, a tale of a charming child wife, remembered by the husband after her early death, took Bengal by storm, inspiring many parents to arrange for their children teenage spouses.

Pather Panchali's home and global fame and similar popularity of most of Ray's subsequent films inspired younger filmmakers. **Purnendu Pattrea** of Kolkata, a poet and a graphic artist, made *Swapna Niye* ('On Dreams') in 1966, which did not do well but was at least a proof that younger people were treading Ray's path, even if it brought no money.

Devaki Basu, who had started in the Silent Era, continued to produce and direct films upto 1961 before passing away, 10 years later, on 11 November 1971 in Kolkata. Of his 32 sound features (counting Hindi and Tamil remakes as one each) only *Kavi* (1954) and *Sagar Sangame* (1959) tended to offbeat. His contemporary, **Nitin Basu** after his break with the New Theatres in 1943, joined the Bombay Talkies in 1950 and under its banner, made 12 films up to 1966. Of these, *Yogayog* (1957), based on a Tagore novel, *Kath Putali*, made in the same year with Amiya Chakravorti and *Hum Kahan Ja Rahe Hain* (1966) were well-made in the Bombay Talkies tradition, but not quite offbeat.

Elsewhere

Offbeat urges were manifest in films of other regions too. **Dr. Bhupen Hazarika's** Assamese debut, *Eri Bator Sur* (1956) was one such. His second, and only Bengali, film, *Mahut Bandhu Re* (1958) was seen widely in West Bengal for its songs, exotic forests and hordes of wild elephants, giving the film a documentary flavour. *Pratidhwani* and *Lati Ghati* got the President's awards for best Assamese films of 1964 and 1966. *Pratidhwani* was even included in a Retrospective of Indian Cinema, hosted by the Cinemathequ , Paris in 1967. His offbeat urge became thinner after *Lati Ghati*.

IX. *Bhuban Shome* Raises A ‘Wave’

“The reality buried under the myths slowly re-flowered. The cinema began the creation of the world.”
—Cesare Zavattini

Both the 1927 Indian Cinematograph Committee, headed by Diwan Bahadur T. Rangachariar and 1949 Film Enquiry Committee, headed by S K Patil recommended the setting up of a film financing body to give low-interest loans and subsidies to producers for making good films, or films providing ‘wholesome entertainment’. With the acceptance of Patil Committee Report (1951), a Film Finance Corporation was set up in Mumbai in 1960 with one crore (10 million) rupees as seed capital. From Finance Ministry, it came under the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting in 1964; in 1980, it merged with the Indian Motion Picture Export Corporation (IMPEC) to become the NFDC. In the late 1960s, at the instance of the then Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the FFC extended its policy to support ‘independent’ filmmakers, paving the way for the emergence of the so-called ‘New Indian Cinema’.

It responded to a number of young applicants for making offbeat films with box-office potential. The FFC financed four films by Satyajit Ray- *Charulata*, *Nayak*, *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* and *Shatranj Ke Khilari*- and the successor NFDC produced *Ghare Baire*. After Dr. B K Karanjia took over its helm, the FFC expanded its financing of low-budget and offbeat films and the success of *Bhuban Shome*, also financed by the FFC, hastened the making of a number of offbeat films under its patronage.

Mrinal Sen’s 10th feature, *Bhuban Shome* (‘Mr. Shome’, 1969) is a 96-minute black & white feature, financed by the FFC but produced by him (Mrinal Sen Productions); he also wrote the script, based on a Bengali story by Balai Chand Mukherjee, a doctor writing under the pen name, *Banaphul*. A middle-aged, widower senior Railway Officer (Utpal Dutt) goes on a holiday to shoot ducks and desert birds in the Rann of Kutch. Wavy sand dunes and fresh air exhilarate him. He meets a young housewife (Suhasini Mulay) in a rann village; her naivete and grace blow away his bureaucratic mask. She turns out to be the wife of a travelling ticket examiner whose dismissal he had ordered before leaving Delhi for alleged corruption. She questions his attitude to life so much that returning to Delhi, he tears off the dismissal order and bursts into childish joy in the office.

The exotic desert milieu and Suhasini Mulay’s graceful acting made it a rave film. It had none of Sen’s Marxist obsession with poverty, misery or squalor but brought home that petty corruption can have a human face. K K Mahajan shot it, mostly outdoor and V Raghava Rao composed its sparse music. It ran to full houses in north and east Indian

circuits, grossed far more than was invested and gave Sen and his company much-needed financial viability. It won a gold medal in International Festival of Cinematographic Art, Venice in 1969 and featured in Directors' Fortnight in Cannes, next year, besides bagging three President's awards for best film, best direction and best actor (Utpal Dutt).

In *Bhuban Shome*, Sen made 'fun of the ridiculous business of bureaucracy', as he put it. It was a straight, hilarious narrative with a funny ending, interlaced with grace and charm of Suhasini Mulay in the role of the TTE's wife. Satyajit Ray praised it in his seminal essay, *Indian New Wave* (1971) but with a rider: "*Bhuban Shome* may well define the kind of offbeat most likely to succeed with our minority audience- the kind that *looks* a bit like its French counterpart-but is essentially old-fashioned and Indian beneath its trendy habit."

X. *Ankur* Crests 'Wave' in Hindi

"My films have changed, because one has to respond to the changing environment. Your core beliefs may remain unchanged but the concerns change along with the style in which you present them".

—Shyam Benegal

Coming four years after *Bhuban Shome*, Shyam Benegal's feature debut, *Ankur* ('The Seedling', 1973) became a sensation, when released in 1974. It came in the thick of an ambience of offbeat films in Bengali and Malayalam and gave an impetus to the genre in Hindi and Urdu. A married college student goes to manage his father's firm in a south Indian village, where he seduces, and runs an affair with, a farm hand's pretty wife (Shabana Azmi). His wife suddenly arrives, complicating the situation. In a horrid climax, he beats up the deaf and dumb farm labourer whom he had sent out on a pretext to make love to his wife. Satyajit Ray praised Benegal's 'great confidence in the handling of two major elements of filmmaking- 'acting and camera' and profusion of details but found the film 'not free from melodrama' and the denouement "conceived as a forced rounding-off". It is a landmark film, like Sen's *Bhuban Shome* and placed Benegal firmly in India's offbeat tradition.

Shyam Benegal, born in Hyderabad (Andhra Pradesh) to a photographer father in 1934, did his post-graduate in economics. He made a home-movie at the age of 12; an early indulgence in films whetted his passion for cinema. He founded one of the earliest film societies in Hyderabad and led the Osmania University contingent to Youth Festivals in Delhi, a number of times. He went over to Mumbai and from a copywriter in a Mumbai advertising firm, Lintas (1959-'63), he rose to be a prolific maker (some 900 advertisement and 11 corporate films) in 14 years for another firm, Advertising & Sales Promotion Company from 1959 to 1973. He co-scripted the Malayalam novel, *Chemmeen* for a film by his cousin, Guru Dutt who did not make it but a story and a script that he wrote in early 1960s, eventually became the basis of his first film, *Ankur* in 1973 after he had also made 14 documentary and short films over 11 years.

Benegal's subsequent films did not make the same impact, nor were they as much aesthetic. *Nishant* (1975) was about persecution of an idealistic school teacher by four young villainous landlords who kidnap and rape his wife (Shabana Azmi); this steels him to organise a revolt by local peasants. A prolonged brutal rape scene, meant to underline class animus, is really nauseating. After making *Charandas Chor*, a slapstick comedy for the Children's Film Society, Benegal went over to make his four most well known films- *Manthan* (1976), *Bhumika* (1977), *Kondura/Anugraham* (1977) and *Junoon* (1978).

Manthan ('The Churning', 1976) was produced by pooling petty contributions from some five lakh farmers of Gujarat, who donated two rupees each, through their milk co-operatives. Expectedly, it was a film on milk farmers and their problems of marketing. A government veterinary expert from Mumbai tries to set up a milk co-operative in a Gujarat village but faces opposition from local vested interests and even by the villagers whom he wants to uplift.

Bhumika ('The Role', 1977) is about a screen actress (Smita) in the late 1930s, who rose from a humble origin, passing through lures and pitfalls of the film world but nevertheless carving out a secure future and social status for herself. It was based on an autobiography of a Marathi-Hindi actress, Hansa Wadkar. A sexual streak which runs through many of Benegal's films, was overt in Hindi *Kondura*, of which a Telugu version, *Anugraham* was also made, simultaneously. It is about a newly married Brahmin's dilemma after he claims to have known a herb root, capable of inducing abortion, from a goddess in a supernatural event. The strict celibacy enjoined on him is threatened and complex events bring about a tragic denouement.

Junoon ('The Obsession', 1978) is a period piece, set in 1857, dealing with a 'muted, inter-racial love story between a young English girl and a Pathan (Muslim) nobleman'. Benegal since made 13 more feature films- *Kalyug* (1981), *Aarohan* (1982), *Mandi* (1983), *Trikaal* (1985), *Susman* (1986), *Antarnaad* and *Suraj Ka Satwan Ghoda* (both 1992), *Mammo* (1995), *Sardari Begun* and *The Making of Mahatma* (both 1996), *Samar & Hari Bhari* (both 1999) and *Zubeida* (2000). *Kalyug*, produced by Shashi Kapoor and written by him and Girish Karnad, is a complex story about two warring business families, climaxing in a murder by a telescopic gun. There are many references to the *Mahabharata* characters, as Benegal wanted to make an epic film. *Arohan*, produced by West Bengal Government, is about abuses perpetrated by landlords on tenant farmers, which drives hordes of them to the city for a living, where they often end up in disease and death.

Mandi ('The Market Place', 1983) is about a brothel in a small town with a lot of caricatures of prostitutes and their 'customers'. With Shabana Azmi in the role of a brothel-owner 'madam' (*Kothewali*), it also addresses the issue of forced prostitution of young girls coming to Mumbai from Bhutan, Nepal and many parts of north India. *Trikaal* is a family-centred narrative in the backdrop of India wresting Goa from Portuguese rule in 1962.

Susman ('The Essence, 1986) is about weavers of famous *Pachampalli* sarees in an Andhra district, who are exploited by middlemen. *Suraj ka Satwan Ghoda*, produced by the NFDC, has a novelty of technique; every evening a young bachelor regales his friends with a true tale of love, sometimes featuring himself. *Mammo*, co-produced by the NFDC and Doordarshan, tells a light-hearted story about Hindu-Muslim relations that explode from time to time. *The Making of Mahatma*, co-produced by the NFDC and South Africa Broadcasting Corporation, recreated the struggles of Gandhi in the then British colony against the *apartheid*, practised by the rulers against Indians. *Sardari*

Begum recreated the life and art of the noted eponymous *thumri* singer who was accidentally killed during Hindu-Muslim riots.

Samar (1999) is a plea against untouchability and deals with a true incident involving a *dalit* and a village headman of Madhya Pradesh, in film within a film style, like Mrinal Sen's *Aakaler Sandhaney* (1980). *Hari Bhari* ('Fertility', 1999), episodic in structure, was sponsored by the Union Ministry of Family Welfare and expectedly, leaves messages about female reproductive rights, timely tubectomy, untimely matrimony, X & Y chromosomes and women empowerment. It strings several stories, involving middle-class Muslim women- all suffering under indiscreet male dominance. *Zubeida* (2000), featuring the mainstream heroine, Karisma Kapoor, as he put it, "is a fairy-tale like romance of a young girl, betrayed in several levels".

FILMS* BY SHYAM BENEGAL

Directed > 1973: *Ankur*; **1975:** *Charandas Chor*, *Nishant*; **1976:** *Manthan*, *Bhumika*; **1977:** *Kondura / Anugraham* (Telugu); **1978:** *Junoon*; **1981:** *Kalyug*; **1982:** *Aarohan*; **1983:** *Mandi*; **1985:** *Trikaal*; **1986:** *Susman*, *Yatra* and *Katha Saagar* (the last two for Doordarshan); **1988:** *Bharat Ek Khoj* (for Doordarshan); **1992:** *Antarnaad*, *Suraj ka Satwan Ghoda*; **1995:** *Mammo*, **1996:** *Sardari Begum*, *The Making of Mahatma* (English); **1999:** *Samar*, *Hari Bhari*; **2000:** *Zubeida*. *All in Hindi except as otherwise mentioned.

Benegal thinks, the 'new kind of cinema' has remained peripheral to the traditional films, because it has been created mainly by people who have found the form of traditional cinema unable "to relate to the complexity of contemporary experience". He admits influence of Mehboob Khan, Guru Dutt, Satyajit Ray, Damle & Fattelal, V. Shantaram, Fellini and Kurosawa on his style and laments that "the term 'art film' has now become a bad word". His women characters, often in the centre of his stories, are strong individuals, because they "were forced to become strong in order to survive". He thinks, Indian cinema is now going through a 'populist phase' and the phase of serious films of the 1970s and 1980s that has gone into hibernation "will definitely re-emerge".

Other Makers in Hindi

Realistic films were made in Hindi and Urdu (not easy to differentiate), from time to time but it was Shyam Benegal's debut, *Ankur* (1973) which started an offbeat 'wave'. The genre was nourished by a host of his coevals and youngsters too- Basu Chatterjee, Basu Bhattacharya, Govind Nihalani, Prakash Jha, Ramesh Sharma, Mani Kaul, Kumar Shahani, Rabindra Dharmaraja, Muzaffar Ali, Mahesh Bhatt, S.A. Mirza, Sai Paranjpe, Vijaya Mehta, Kalpana Lajmi and Nabendu Ghosh. Some directors made films in Hindi besides their own languages, e.g. M.S. Sathyu (Urdu and Kannada), Girish Karnad (Kannada), Gautam Ghosh (Bengali), Buddhadev Dasgupta (Bengali), Ketan Mehta (Gujarati), K. Balachander (Tamil and Telugu), Kantilal Rathod (Gujarati), and Amol Palekar (Marathi).

Basu Chatterjee

Basu Chatterjee and Basu Bhattacharya were almost coevals but came to make films at different ages and from different backgrounds. Chatterjee, born at Ajmer in 1930, grew up in Uttar Pradesh, which made him an expatriate Bengali. He came to Mumbai, when very young and drew cartoons for *Blitz* weekly for 19 years before venturing to make his debut, *Sara Aakash* in 1969. Curiously, he assisted Basu Bhattacharya in making his debut, *Teesri Kasam* (1966) before making his own. *Sara Aakash* was shot in real locations and outdoor, like early offbeat films. A newly married couple in a joint family try to know each other but feel a thorn in their relationship, as theirs was an arranged marriage on payment of dowry to the groom. The young husband fears that the wife will disturb his studies. Her in-laws relegate the wife, an educated girl, to the kitchen. One day, she inadvertently cooks in a vessel for a religious ritual, making the entire house, including her husband, rise against her. Being humiliated and beaten up, she returns to her parents. In her absence, the husband feels guilty and remorse for his cowardice and eventually brings her back.

Chatterjee made 32 more feature films for cinema and six for Doordarshan, of which only three- *Swami* ('Husband', 1977), *Khatta Mitha* ('Sour & Sweet' 1978) and *Jeena Yahan* ("We have to live here!", 1979)- were shown in Indian Panorama. Many of his films- more of the 'middle cinema' kind than offbeat- were enormous box-office successes, e.g. *Rajanigandha* (1974), *Chhotisi Baat* (1975), *Tumhare Liye* (1978). Although a Bengali, all his films, except the latest *Hathat Brishti* ('Sudden Rain', 1998) were in Hindi- romantic and pleasant- a kind of 'comedy of manners', none focussing on pet offbeat themes like poverty, exploitation and corruption.

Basu Bhattacharya

Basu Bhattacharya made a mark with his debut, *Teesri Kasam* in 1966 which took virtually the entire country by storm. He turned out to be a slow filmmaker, making only 12 more films till his latest, *Astha* in 1997. His films are also of the 'middle cinema' kind. His other remarkable films are *Uski Kahani* (1966), *Anubhav* (1971), *Avishkar* (1973), *Grihapravesha* (1979) and *Panchavati* (1986). The last two films made it to the Indian Panorama.

Personal experience of two separated couples made him devote three of his films- *Anubhav*, *Avishkar* and *Grihapravesha*- to the theme of misalliance. They were very subtle in depicting the day-to-day relationships of three married couples in urban milieu. *Panchavati*, an Indo-Nepal production, was about two brothers whose cordial relations are disturbed, when an attractive woman painter comes between them.

Astha, coming after a decade, returned to his favourite man-woman relationship. A housewife (Rekha), while buying shoes for her daughter, is trapped by a procuress of call girls, who lead her to a vice den in a five-star hotel, where for gifts of diamonds and rings, she gets into steamy sex with a stranger. Coming to know of her escapades, her professor husband (Om Puri) does not give her up but with help of a girl student save

their marriage from the rocks. In this latest film, Bhattacharya exposed the consumer culture, sweeping cities. The film is spoilt, however, by incessant drone on the soundtrack, often drowning dialogues.

He co-directed an Indo-Czech-Swiss production, *Bitter Autumn with the Scent of Mangoes* in 1983 about a Czech documentary-maker who, coming to India to research for a film is influenced by Nehru's ideas and India's spirituality. His other films are *Daku*, *Tumhara Kalloo & Sangat* (all in 1975), *Madhu Malati* (1978), *Anveshan* (1985) for Doordarshan and *Ek Saas Zindagi* (1991). He made his films on shoestring budgets; he once said: "Beat or offbeat, filmmaking exercises such an attraction that it makes people work for it on an empty stomach and a mind full of dreams."

Govind Nihalani

Govind Nihalani, born in 1940 at Karachi (Pakistan), came to Udaipur as a refugee with his parents in 1947 and later moved to Delhi. After obtaining a diploma in cinematography from S J Polytechnic, Bangalore in 1962, he became assistant cameraman to V K Murthy in 1970. He co-produced and photographed Satyadev Dubey's Marathi feature, *Shantata, Court Chalu Ahe*. He joined Benegal's unit and shot his films up to *Aarohan* (1981). Richard Attenborough engaged him as director-cameraman of the second unit for *Gandhi* in 1982. His debut (as director), *Aakrosh* ('Cry of the Wounded', 1980) made a sensation and shared the award for best film, the Golden Peacock, in 1981 Delhi Festival, apart from the President's award for Best Hindi Film. It was about an unlettered tribal, accused of killing his wife, who maintains a stony silence before his defence counsel. The counsel finds out that his silence is due to fear of the society's elite who had conspired to rape and kill his wife. The next film, *Vijeta* ('The Victor', 1982), produced by *Filmwalas* of Shashi Kapoor, was about a young Sikh Air Force pilot under training in a forward airbase. It was made for the Indian Air Force on the occasion of its Golden Jubilee and therefore, a publicity film.

His second feature, *Ardh Satya* ('Half Truth', 1983) was a shocking exposure of criminal-politician nexus. More candid as a political film than any of Mrinal Sen's and similar to Don Siegel's *Dirty Harry* (1971), it horrified viewers. Particularly unbearable is a sequence of a police sub-inspector mercilessly beating up an undertrial in the lock-up to extract confession (this book's back cover shows a still of the scene). Its well-deserved box-office success came as much from his smart photography and a moving story as from superb rendering of the sub-inspector by Om Puri and his girl-friend, Smita Patil.

Party (1984), produced by the NFDC, was a close study of the elites of a city, to whom a high-society lady, a patron of arts, gives a party to felicitate a writer, receiving a prestigious award. Nihalani probes the lives of some respectable people and exposes their hypocrisy, immorality, emptiness and ennui. *Aaghat*, next year (1986), was a similar probing study of an intellectual- a Communist Party worker- heading a trade union of a private industry. A complex skein of events and episodes, embodying class animus, is woven around the concept of Marxist Revolution for which he chooses to wait and work.

The next film, *Drohakaal* ('Time for Betrayal', 1995) on terrorism was far less successful, like its Telugu version by Kamalahasan. It focussed on the moral dilemma of people, indulging in terrorism and those who want to curb it. It is a gripping story of an under-cover police operation to infiltrate a dreaded terrorist group. *Drishti* (1990), adapted from a foreign play, dealt with a romantic theme, woven with, as he said, 'raindrops and roses' and got the national award for best Hindi film of 1990. A five-hour serial, *Tamas* ('Darkness'), telecast on Doordarsan's national channel, was cut down to an eponymous feature in 1988. It recreated the brutal killings of Hindus and arson of their property in Pakistan, forcing them to flee to India after the Partition, which Nihalani himself saw as a boy of seven, when his family migrated from Karachi to Udaipur.

Nine of his films figured on the Indian Panorama, right from his debut *Aakrosh* to his latest, *Hazar Chaurasi ki Ma* ('The Mother of No. 1084', 1997). Since *Tamas*, he has been making features for the small screen, mostly adaptations of foreign plays, e.g., *Jazeere* (1989), adapted from Henrik Ibsen's *The Little Eyolt*, *Rukmavati ki Haveli* (1991) from Garcia Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba*, *Pita* (1991) from Strindberg's *The Father*. His 1996 film, *Sansodhan* ('Amendment'), co-produced by the UNICEF and NFDC, is about a group of poorer women in a village who struggle to gain rightful representation in the local *Panchayet*. One such woman's husband is indebted to a rich and clever villager (Thakur) who wants that only women from his clan be elected. She is not daunted by lack of co-operation from her community and an attack on her husband and is ultimately elected.

In *Hazar Chaurasi ki Ma*, based on a story by Mahasweta Devi (Ritwik Ghatak's niece), Nihalani returned to a political theme- the Naxalite uprising in West Bengal in the early 1970s and its brutal repression by the police. A middle-aged woman, working in a Kolkata bank, wakes up one morning to know that her youngest son is lying dead in a police morgue with a tag number 1084. This starts her on a journey of discovery of the anti-Establishment movement that later took the name of People's War Group and spread to Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. As she comes to know her favourite son's revolutionary ardour, she understands her alienation from the complacent, hypocritical society that he rebelled against. The film reverted to the theme dealt with by Mrinal Sen and Buddhadev Dasgupta, just as sensitively.

Nihalani's 1999 film, *Thakshak* blended entertainment values with a serious theme, diluting the offbeat ethos. Hindi mainstream actress, Tabu performed sizzling, sexy dances and actor, Ajay Devgan played a lead role. Nihalini denied the charge of diluting, rather unconvincingly, saying that it was 'merely an addition' to his oeuvre and that he took 'a parallel route' to his 'usual way of filmmaking'. Laced with songs and dances, the film exposed the underworld of crime and violence in Mumbai (which infiltrated the film industry too, climaxing in gruesome murder of a tycoon, Gulshan Kumar in a temple). The plot is very intricate, with a demented youth threatening with his futuristic gun and the protagonist living two lives of crime and romance. It also leaves a subtle message: "how insecure everybody is, every moment, in an urban society because of presence of pervasive crime".

His next feature, *Deham* ('Body', 2000), shown in the Indian Panorama, is based on Manjula Padmanabhan's award-winning play, *Harvest* about a Hindi-speaking family whose contact with the West transforms its members' lifestyle and language. Nihalani's films are imbued with a deep social awareness but mostly of the negative kind- crime, violence and corruption in high places, which became a kind of *leit motif* in many mainstream films too. Himself wielding the camera, he made his films visually rich but thematically, they lack variety. He considers *Ardh Satya* his 'most powerful film'.

Prakash Jha

There is a kind of familiar resemblance in feature films by Prakash Jha, Ramesh Sharma, R Dharmaraja and S A Mirza; they all deal with deprivation, class encounter, crimes against women and Machiavellian, muscle-power politics. Born in backward Champaran district of Bihar in 1952, Jha grew up amidst poverty and socio-political turmoil in his State. Dropping out of an editing course in Pune Film Institute, Jha made five documentaries and three short films, before making his debut feature, *Hip Hip Hurray* in 1984 about a young computer engineer, straight-forward but old-fashioned in values and a lover of sports. Looking for a job, he gets into various encounters but eventually marries a school mistress. In between shorts and documentaries, Jha made four more feature films- *Damul* ('Bonded until Death', 1985), *Parinati* ('The Inevitable', 1987), nine years later, *Mrityudand* ('Death Penalty', 1996) and *Gangajal* (2003).

Damul's milieu is the backward Ganga belt region of Bihar, where polls were rigged and agricultural labours are bonded to landlords for generations under the *Panha* system. It is a powerful film with a morbid and tortuous story about caste conflicts, massacres of untouchables, rape of their womenfolk, spiral of debt and crime involving sale of cattle and mafia-ruled village councils (*panchayets*). It has excellent colour photography but because of poor or no lights, night scenes strain the eye. Causing a sensation in 1986 Delhi festival, it placed him in the forefront of the offbeat movement in Hindi.

His next film, *Parinati* (1987) is about a poor Rajasthani couple who runs an inn. A guest offers to take away their young son to educate and get him employed thereafter in a town. They do not agree but slowly their desire to get rich makes them relent. They give the son out of greed for money and invite a tragedy.

Jha's 1996 film, *Mrityudand* ('Death Penalty') is a 'powerful indictment of patriarchy, exploitation and the collusion of religion with muscle power'. In a village in Bihar, an unrelenting patriarchal order results in the death of all the women for protesting against their plight. Like Govind Nihalani in *Thakshak* (1999) later, Jha wrapped up the offbeat theme with entertainment ingredients, featuring two matinee idols of Mumbai- Madhuri Dixit and Shilpa Shirodkar, besides offbeat favourites- Shabana Azmi, Om Puri and Mohan Agashe.

His 2003 film, *Gangajal* created media hype, like a Hindi blockbuster, when it was released on the all-India circuit in October; it was on the sensational blinding of convicts in Bhagalpur jail in Bihar in the late 1970s, exposed by a big newspaper. As he said, the

film “gets into the inner dynamics of the entire process of corruption” in the police, as in *Mrityudand* and *Damul*. Although it has practically no song, it experimented with background score, composed by Wayne Sharpe of New York, aided by Sandesh Shandilya, blending Western and Indian sounds. The theme song was sung by Nikki Gregoroff of the USA. The film questions India’s policing system. Set in a small Bihar town on the bank of the Ganga, it is about a middle-class traveller (played by Mumbai mainstream actor, Ajay Devgan) in a train who cannot reach his destination because of crimes *en route*. Jha laments the caricature of Biharis in mainstream films; they are cast as villains and their spoken Hindi is made fun of. His oeuvre from *Damul* to *Mrityudand* is a trajectory of oppressed and exploited peasants and women of Bihar by iniquitous feudal and patriarchal orders.

Romesh Sharma

Romesh Sharma, born and brought up in Kalimpong (Darjeeling), leapt into fame with his only feature film for the wide screen, *New Delhi Times* in 1985. It is a tortuous story about an investigative reporter of a Delhi newspaper, who pursues news of a mysterious murder to discover the involvement of a popular Chief Minister, locked in a power struggle with a rival politician. Photographed marvellously by Subrata Mitra, the film featured Shashi Kapoor and Sharmila Tagore in the roles of the reporter and his wife, a lawyer. They take the layers off a murky underworld of crime to find that respectable politicians are involved in it- a recurrent theme in India’s political cinema, both offbeat and mainstream. Through complex and quizzical events, the journalist comes to realize the futility of investigative journalism.

Saeed Akhtar Mirza

Saeed Akhtar Mirza, born in Mumbai in 1943, took the film direction course at FTII, Pune in 1975 and three years later, made his debut, *Arvind Desai ki Ajeeb Dastan* (‘The Strange Destiny of Arvind Desai’, 1978), produced by Yukt Film Co-operative that Mani Kaul, he and K. Hariharan had launched in 1976. This and his other films- titles uniquely running into sentences- were inspired by two foreign offbeat movements- *Cinema Verite* of Italy and *Cinema Nuovo* of Brazil, which influenced him. The only son of a rich businessman, dealing in luxury handicrafts etc. habitually questions the values of the upper class. He finds that his father is unscrupulously exploiting the poor labourers who manufacture his wares. He discusses art with a Marxist friend, secretly dates with his father’s secretary and occasionally goes to a prostitute. His father arranges a marriage with a Paris-returned girl, which he cannot oppose; this frustrates the Goanese secretary and her mother.

His next two features, *Albert Pinto ko Gussa Kyon Ata Hai* (“Why is Albert Pinto Angry?” 1980) and *Mohan Joshi Haazir Ho* (“Mohan Joshi goes to court.”, 1984) deals with his pet theme of hypocrisy and what he calls ‘pseudo-morality’ in the society. Mirza is an ardent advocate of offbeat cinema, which he thinks, should “run parallel to the commercial cinema”. Avowedly a Marxist, he bluntly questions the viewers’ ideas,

eschewing the traditional plot, or narrative structure, of films. His unconcealed cynicism about the contemporary urban society came full-blown in *Albert Pinto ko Gussa Kyon Ata Hai?*. A Goanese Roman Catholic Christian, Albert Pinto is a happy-go-lucky garage-mechanic (Naseeruddin Shah), settled in Mumbai. He gets angry over his girl friend, a company secretary, wearing skirts, mixing freely with other garage hands and tolerating her boss's advances. He breaks off with her but returns in the end, realising the futility of class fight.

Mohan Joshi Haazir Ho, produced by the NFDC, is about the pitfalls of the judiciary, its weird and long-winded procedures, manipulation of witnesses, indifference of judges and the lack of scruples in lawyers. These combine to nearly ruin an old couple who had sued their landlord for trying to evict them. Passing through many odds, they realize the futility of it all and let the old house be demolished at last, to enable 'promoters' build high-rise ownership flats at the site. Mirza considers *Arvind Desai* etc. his best film, 'classic in construction, rather academic but with fewer mistakes than *Albert Pinto*'.

Another film, *Salim Langde pe Mat Ro* ("Do not cry for Salim, the Lame", 1989) was also showcased in Indian Panorama. A lame man, born in poor Muslim family of Mumbai, becomes a petty thief in the ambience of the crime-prone neighbourhood. His and his family's problems reflect those of his class- the underworld of crime and punishment. His father, a militant trade unionist, had been rendered jobless after the textile mills' strike in Bhiwandi in 1982. His earnings from petty thefts add to the meagre income of other family members- of mother from sewing work and of a brother, an electrician. He meets a suitor of his loving sister, who is attacked by fundamentalists for preaching education for Muslim women. After a gangster friend dies, he confronts real dons of Mumbai's underworld and is stabbed during his sister's marriage.

Naseem (1995) is about a middle-class family in Mumbai during communal riots in the city after the demolition of Babri mosque in Ayodhya on 6th December 1992 by Hindu fanatics. A young and lively college student, Naseem is very close to, and admires, her grandfather (played by Kaifi Azmi, Shabana Azmi's father), a poet and writer, preaching values of secularism. As frenzy builds up over the disputed structure, the grandfather's desire to live decreases. They are caught in a web of hate, anger and frustration in the wake of the demolition.

Rabindra Dharmaraj

Rabindra Dharmaraj, whose debut and only feature, *Chakra* was a sensation in Indian Panorama of 1981, was a passionate filmmaker. Passing out of St. Stephens College in Delhi, he took to drugs 'to forge a new consciousness' and eventually went to Vietnam as a War Correspondent, from where his reports and photos got published in the international media. Returning to Delhi, he worked in All India Radio for a while but gave it up to go to the USA to study film and video techniques in California University. After making a series of documentaries, advertisement and television films, he made *Chakra* on a Marathi novel by Jaywant Dalvi on life in a Mumbai slum (apparently of notorious *Dharavi*).

Chakra ('Vicious Circle', 1980) is a truly neo-realist film with excellent photography by Barun Mukherjee, stirring music by Hriday Mangeshkar (Lata's brother), fine art direction by Bansi Chandragupta and superb characterization of a young slum woman by Smita Patil (comparable to Sophia Loren's in *Two Women*, 1960) and of other roles by Naseeruddin Shah and Kulbhushan Kharbanda. She comes to Mumbai with her son and husband to live in the anonymity of a slum, as the husband had killed a pawnbroker for trying to rape her. After a brief happiness, tragedy strikes, as the husband is killed while trying to steal building materials to construct a hut. Two men woo her to marry - a pimp (Naseeruddin Shah) and a truck driver; the latter impregnates her. The pimp draws his son into the quagmire of crime and both are arrested after a hot pursuit. Bulldozers raze the slum and the widow has a miscarriage. It is one of the bleakest Indian offbeat films, like Buddhadev Dasgupta's *Neem Annapurna* (1979) and Gautam Ghosh's *Paar* (1984). Dharmaraj was planning his second film on a foreign criminal in Delhi's Tihar Jail, Charles Shobhraj when he died suddenly of ulcer at the age of 33 in a Mumbai hospital in 1981.

Muzaffar Ali

Muzaffar Ali was born in Lucknow in a royal family; his father, Sajid Husain was Raja of Kotwara, a descendent of Wajed Ali Shah, the ruler of Avadh, whom East India Company unfairly deposed, on which Satyajit Ray made *Shatranj ke Khiladi* in 1977. He made his debut in cinema at the age of 34 with *Gaman* ('Going Away', 1978) about a jobless young man of Uttar Pradesh going to Mumbai to become a taxi driver but unable to forget his wife (Smita Patil) and mother. Ali himself wrote and produced the film with a subsidy from the FFC. It was praised by the jury in some international festivals, apart from qualifying for the Indian Panorama, next year.

Abundant fame and fortune came to him for his second feature in 1981, *Umrao Jaan*, one of the all-time super-hits of Indian cinema. Based on a popular Urdu novel by Mohammed Hadi Ruswa, it was the true story of a Urdu poetess and courtesan of Lucknow in the 19th century, Umrao Jaan, superbly enacted by Rekha (Gemini Ganesan's daughter by his first wife, Pushpavalli) - in fact, possibly her career-best. Its poignant story, opulent sets, lilting *ghazals* and lyrics, written by poet Shahryar and sung playback by Asha Bhosle and the background music, composed by Khayyam made it a rave film. It traced the life of a *tawaif* (dancing courtesan in Mughal India) from her childhood when she was kidnapped and sold to a brothel where she learnt to sing, dance and write poetry. These made her a covetable *tawaif* to Lucknow aristocrats. Ali, descending from a Nawab family, had first-hand knowledge of the colourful ambience and opulence, depicted in the film.

His next film, *Aagaman* (1983), laced with songs and dances, was about a co-operative movement by sugarcane growers. The fourth feature, *Anjuman* was about an eponymous young woman of Lucknow, making her and family's living out of the city's legendary *chikan* work. She refuses to marry a *nawab*, exercising her Islamic right. In revenge, the jilted lover incites riots between two Muslim sects to disrupt the *chikan* workers' movement. *Anjuman* is unshaken and spearheads it again. *Gaman*, *Umrao Jaan* and *Anjuman* were shown in the Indian Panorama to wide acclaim.

Mahesh Bhatt

Mahesh Bhatt, born in Mumbai in 1948 to the noted film director, Nanabhai Bhatt, made a few offbeat films, apart from the larger corpus in the mainstream. *Arth* ('The Meaning', 1983) is about an ambitious man (Kulbhusan Kharbanda), torn between his wife (Shabana Azmi) and a neurotic mistress (Smita Patil). His next, *Saaransh* ("The Gist", 1984) is about an old headmaster's obsession with the memories of his young son, killed senselessly in New York. He writes him letters every night, only to throw them away, next day. Many more misfortunes and shocks goad him and his wife to unsuccessful suicides and fleeing from home but they decide to stay back to rear a tenant's yet unborn son, whom they believe to be their killed son, returning to them in rebirth. *Janam* (1986), made for Doordarshan, dealt with a young son's dislike of his father, a retired film-director, secretly dallying with another wife in an old home. Mahesh Bhatt has no qualm about mixing commercial claptrap with offbeat ethos. His telefilm, *Daddy* (1991), dealing with a young girl's determination to save his talented singer-father from alcoholism and senility, was quite a success on Doordarshan. Bhatt was one of the earliest to cross over to the mainstream to make films with entertainment values (e.g. *Dil Hai ki Maanta Nahin*, 1991) but is disgusted with recent Hindi blockbusters. "If art is a reflection of society, I would say, our cinema has hit rock bottom. Our films are only concerned with surface dazzle. Indian cinema is a moral pigmy and an intellectual spastic.", he told *Times of India* on 03 January 2004. Out of his over 35 feature films, only two were shown in the Indian Panorama- *Saaransh* and *Janam*. He also acted in three films by others.

Nabendu Ghosh

For a long time, Nabendu Ghosh wrote scripts of Hindi films by Bimal Roy, Hrishikesh Mukherjee, Basu Bhattacharya, Asit Sen and of others before venturing to make a film himself, quite late in life, in 1988. Buddha's 'Fire Sermon' inspired *Trishagni* ('Sand Storm' 1988), based on a Bengali detective fiction by Saradindu Banerjee. It was set in the first century B.C. when Buddhism was spreading to Central Asia but developing a schism in India. A monastery in a desert is spared a fierce sandstorm which sweeps a nearby hamlet and kills everybody except a small boy and a girl. Two surviving monks pick and bring them up in the Buddhist monastic discipline. When they grow up, they fall in love, which come in the way of the boy's (now a young man) becoming an ascetic. The younger monk, seeing the girl bathing naked one day, is roused sexually. Being jealous of the boy, he expels him from the holy order and the monastery. The girl woos him away to marry him and while trekking through the desert, they are swept away by a sandstorm, which also takes the jealous monk as its victim.

Shekhar Kapoor

Shekhar Kapoor had a meteoric rise from a model and an actor to an Oscar-nominee director of Hollywood. Born in Kanpur in 1945, he studied in New Delhi and went to England to become a chartered accountant. Returning to India and after modelling and acting in films (e.g. in Mani Kaul's *Nazar*, 1989), he made his debut,

Masoom ('Innocent') in 1982, adapted from Eric Segal's *Man, Woman & Child*. The idyllic happiness of an architect, his wife and two small daughters, living in Mumbai, ends when the father receives a telegram from his old school, asking him to take away his illegitimate son, born of a casual sex with a woman who had died. The wife's illusion about her husband is shattered. The child is brought and their two little daughters- its half sisters- shower on it love and affection. *Mr. India* (1987) that followed *Masoom* was a super-hit fantasy but not an offbeat film.

The next film, *Bandit Queen* (1994) on a real-life woman dacoit, Phoolan Devi was even a greater megahit in India and abroad. Phoolan Devi was born in a village in eastern Uttar Pradesh in a low-caste family and at the age of 11, given in marriage to a widower, three times her age. She was caught in a feud between the upper and the lower castes, resulting in her serial rape, at the age of 15, by the son and friends of a village-head. Next year, dacoits of Chambal Valley in Madhya Pradesh abducted her from her parents' house and their deputy leader married her. Two upper-caste dacoits killed her husband to avenge his murder of the ring leader who kept Phoolan as a mistress. She was kept captive in a village, Behmai near Mirzapur, where she was again gang-raped for three weeks by upper-caste Thakurs and paraded naked. Rescued by a priest, she eventually formed her own gang and on 14th February 1981 gunned down 22 upper-caste persons in Behmai. She ravaged the area with her gang for the next two years, eluding the police many times but in 1983 surrendered in a public gathering. She was kept in Gwalior Central Jail without trial for 11 years but let off on parole by the Chief Minister of a casteist political party that came to power in Uttar Pradesh in 1994.

She joined the party and was twice elected on its ticket to the Lok Sabha- in 1996 and 2000. She married a businessman and became a Buddhist. While returning from Parliament on 25th July, 2001 she was gunned down in front of her official bungalow by a group of men; it is not clear whether it was an act of revenge for her Behmai killings, or for some other motive. She had once remarked in an Internet chat that she would rather be born an animal in next birth, if any than a low-class woman to be spared serial rapes and torture by upper-caste people. The film covered her bandit career until her dramatic surrender and became enormously popular in India and abroad for its pathetic theme and exotic milieu and none the less for the gang-rapes and a long shot of her (enacted by Seema Biswas) walking naked to a well to fetch water at the behest of upper-caste Thakurs.

Amol Palekar

Four of the feature films, directed by Marathi Amol Palekar were in Hindi- *Ankahee* ('The Unspoken', 1984), *Thodasa Roomani Ho Jaye* ('Let's get romantic!', 1990) and *Kairee* ('The Raw Mango', 1999). *Ankahee* is about a weak-minded youth who believes that the predictions by his astrologer father, often bogus, could be destructive. But when he predicts that the girl he wants to marry will die in childbirth, he cannot wholly disbelieve. When he vacillates- whether to marry her or not- a daughter of his father's childhood friend comes to stay for treatment of anxiety neurosis; she has also been a

victim of witch doctors in her village. He thinks of a plan to marry the neurotic girl so that after she dies of childbirth, as predicted, he can marry the girl he loves. The girl refuses to go ahead with the nefarious plan and breaks off with him. He marries the neurotic girl and when she conceives, tells her his father's prediction. She has been completely cured, meanwhile but when she goes into labour, he and his father become acutely anxious. She survives with the baby but the girl who refused to marry him commits suicide.

Thodasa Roomani Ho Jaye! (1990) is about an unmarried woman in a barren and dry town, badly in need of rains. A stranger comes to it and his antics bring rain; he also brings romance into her life. It is an entertaining musical and some of its dialogues are spoken in songs and rhyme like Ray's *Hirak Rajar Deshe* (1980). Inspired by a chance encounter with a shepherdess, his next film, *Daayra* ('The Square Circle', 1996) was hailed in Nantes festival but was severely criticised in India. His view of 'natural bisexuality' of human beings and even of Hindu gods, like Shiva (*Ardhanarishwar*) outraged Hindus. A day before her marriage, a young girl (Sonal Kulkarni) is kidnapped by car-borne pimps, scouting for virgins for sale to brothels. She flees from them, many miles away from her home and while returning by road, is raped and beaten by some villagers. Escaping from them, she gets a haircut and disguises herself as a male and enjoys the freedom of men in a male-dominated society. During her safe and long journey home, she meets a touring singer-cum-dancer who is actually a transvestite in female disguise. She overcomes her repulsion to this 'half-man, half-woman', when she comes to know him. She plays male characters in her itinerant performances and returning to her village, changes to her feminine dress and behaviour. Her family and kins refuse to accept her on the plea that she must have become a prostitute without long male protection. Meanwhile, she falls in love with her bisexual companion and has sex with him but their relation ends in violence and tragedy. Palekar wrote a novel, '*Lovers are not people!*' and a script of a film, to deal with incestuous relation to propagate his view.

Claimed as his best film, *Kairee* on a popular Marathi story by G.A.Kulkarni is about an orphaned girl, who is brought over from her refined home by her maternal aunt after her parents' death. The aunt (Taani *mausi*) brings her up amid negligence, humiliation, infidelity and cruelty by her husband for remaining childless. A deep bond grows between them and *mausi*, wanting to preserve her innocence and sensitivity, creates a joyful world of sunshine, forests, streams, peacocks and green mangoes (*kairee*, in Marathi). Eventually, she is sent away to an uncle in Mumbai, because she feels, the girl will have no future in her home. Although made for the Union Ministry of Health & Family Welfare under its Women Empowerment Programme, it does not smack at all of propaganda, or sponsorship and was acclaimed in Nantes Festival in France. Palekar changed the protagonist from a boy in the novel to a 10-year old girl (Yogita Deshpande), who has no name in the film.

Palekar next film in Hindi, *Kal ka Aadmi* (2001) is on a pioneer of family planning in Maharashtra, Raghunath Karve who started India's first birth-control clinic in Mumbai in 1921 when Marie Stopes opened hers in London. He also edited a magazine on sex

education and preached gender equality, unthinkable in the 1920s. He used to say that "it should be entirely a woman's prerogative to decide whether, when and from whom to have a child". Except this and *Bangarwadi*, all his films seek to explore women's status in society.

Ketan Mehta

Ketan Mehta took to making Hindi films after the commercial failure of his Gujarati debut, *Bhavni Bhavai* (1980). He made four features- *Holi* (1984), *Mirch Masala* (1986), *Maya Memsaab* (1992) and *Sardar* (1994), which were all shown in the Indian Panorama. *Holi* is about campus violence, which bottled-up university students indulge in, on a day the Vice-Chancellor asks them to attend a guest lecture on cultural heritage of India. Students feel stifled by a regressive and frustrating educational system. They fight and set fire to furniture and equipment and brutalise the authorities for denouncing their leaders. The police take away the ring leaders some of whom are sentenced to one-year jail where they plan to celebrate *holi*, the Hindu festival of colours. The morning after the orgies, students sing a sad song, posing a question: "What sort of world we are heading to; what is the end of this journey?"

Most popular of these four films is *Mirch Masala* ('Spices'), featuring Naseeruddin Shah, Om Puri and Smita Patil in the roles of a Subedar, a spice factory guard and a village belle, lusted by the Subedar. Its wit, humour and a gripping story, told with technical virtuosity, made it an all-India sensation. In the 1940s, much before India became free from British rule, a Subedar (tax collector) arrives suddenly in a Gujarat village with an entourage and puts up a tent on its edge. A madcap official, he flirts with local bellés and makes the village dance to his tunes. A young woman (Smita Patil) turns him on and despite her rebuffs- even a slap in public- he is bent on having her. To flee from his advances from horseback, she takes refuge in a spices factory. The factory guard (Om Puri) bolts the strong doors to repulse the Subedar's men. As life goes on inside undisturbed, outside the anger of the Subedar mounts, who threatens to set the whole village on fire if this woman is not handed over to him. She resolves to die than give in. When the Subedar and his men break open the factory gates and advance to women, they blind them by throwing red chilli powder on their eyes and flee.

Maya Memsaab is an adaptation of Gustav Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) in a credible Indian setting, with Deepa Sahi- Mehta's wife- in the title role. It was a sensation in 1993 Delhi festival and a cinema-hall, showing it was vandalised, as rumours spread about Deepa's exposures and explicit sex scenes. A rich enigmatic woman, living in a secluded *haveli*, falls passionately in love with a young doctor (Shah Rukh Khan), coming to treat her dislocated knee. When his wife dies, he marries Maya and together they spend a sizzling honeymoon. Returning to daily drudgery, she lives in a fantasy world of romance, passion and consumerism bred by novels and films and indulges in adultery again. Nothing gives her peace; finally, consumed by debt, she escapes mysteriously.

Maya Memsaab became a super-hit when released commercially. Mehta departed from the French original; in the film, Maya, unlike Madame Bovary, does not commit

suicide but vanishes into a cloud of smoke. Like *Paroma* (1985) by Aparna Sen, the film raised heat and dust of controversy in the media. Mehta was charged with sullyng the institution of marriage and showing explicit sex outside marriage, despite cuts by the censors. He was also criticised for featuring a mainstream megastar, Shah Rukh Khan in the role of Maya's lover and for loading the film with commercial claptrap of cheap songs and very fast pace.

His 1993 film, *Sardar* is homage to a great son of India and of Gujarat, Mehta's home State, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel who integrated princely States with the Indian Union after Independence as Home Minister through negotiations and force. It dealt with the last five years of the life of the 'Iron Man', played by Paresh Rawal. The film won the Nargis Dutt Award for the best feature film on national integration, Sardar Patel's unrealized dream.

Among his films that did not make to the Indian Panorama, *Hero Hiralal* (1988) is about an auto-rickshaw driver (Naseeruddin Shah) who is so addicted to Hindi popular cinema that he mimics the film heroes. It was a delightful *pastiché*, blurring the divide between offbeat and mainstream cinema, which Mehta also attempted in *Mirch Masala*. A shooting takes place in his town and Hiralal watches it intensely. He falls in love with the leading lady and offers to die for her, as in a commercial film. His 1994 film, *Oh Darling, Yeh Hai India*, featuring Shah Rukh Khan and Deepa Shahi, did not do well in box office.

Girish Karnad

Karnad made three films in Hindi- *Godhuli*, *Utsav* and *Cheluvi*- different from the run-of-the-mill mainstream. *Godhuli* on a story by S L Byrappa deals with the conflict between the Hindu and American attitude to the cow. *Utsav* is a rendering of Shudraka's Sanskrit play, *Mrichhakatikam* ('Little Clay Cart'), an erotic comedy, treated rather like 'hardcore porn', starring Rekha as a young courtesan who is desired by many affluent persons of the time. Karnad, like Pattabhi, became concerned with ecology from his *Kaadu*, which came full-blown in his *Cheluvi* ('The Flowering Tree', 1992). A Kannada folktale retold in celluloid, it was dubbed in Hindi and featured in the Indian Panorama, next year. An old woman lives in penury near a forest with her two daughters. Under a boon, the younger, Cheluvi could become a flowering tree by muttering a spell; she returned to her human form, if somebody else muttered another. The son of the village headman chieftain, seduced by the scent of her flowers, marries her and enjoys her mysterious flowering in privacy. During his absence one day, his sister forces Cheluvi to reveal the secret. After Cheluvi becomes a tree, she mutters the spell to restore her human form, wrongly; as a result, Cheluvi cannot become a woman again. Her husband, who did not know the spell, returns to find that he has lost her for ever. Children knife the bark of the tree, rendering Cheluvi's tree-body a stump. The headman clears the forest glade to build a mansion for his son who carts off the tree-stump to a tragic end.

S S Gulzar

Sampooran Singh Gulzar's films may not be truly offbeat but they do not belong to the mainstream either; they are more like 'middle cinema'. He entered cinema as a lyricist and script-writer in Mumbai and became Bimal Roy's assistant. He wrote songs and scripts for a number of major directors, e.g. Hrishikesh Mukherjee, Basu Chatterjee, Asit Sen and Kumar Shahani in Mumbai and Buddhadev Dasgupta in Kolkata (for his *Aandhi Gali*) and made his first feature, *Mere Apne* in 1971 - a remake of Tapan Sinha's *Apanjan* (1968). Married to a noted Bengali actress, Rakhi, Gulzar admits strong influence of Bengali literature and culture and made three films, based on Bengali novels, e.g., *Khushboo* (1975) by Sarat Chandra and *Kitaab & Namkeen* in 1977 and 1982 respectively, by Samaresh Bose. His best and nearly offbeat is *Aandhi* in 1975. The daughter of a senior politician (played by Suchitra Sen), is egged on by him to contest an election. Her hotelier husband (Sanjeev Kumar) does not like it; they eventually separate and live in two different places. She passes through many odds that are incidental to political careers in India but during a hectic electioneering meets and stays with her husband. The opposition, not knowing they are married, kicks up a scandal. The film got into serious trouble with the censors during the Emergency (1975-'77), because Mrs. Sen with a streak of white hair resembled Indira Gandhi and the story had obvious similarities with Mrs. Gandhi's life..

Others

The only film, made by US-educated **Avtar Kaul** (who drowned shortly after making it), *27 Down* is truly offbeat. The son of a train driver becomes a travelling ticket examiner in a train, plying from Varanasi. Unable to free himself from his father's domination, he cannot pull up courage to marry a girl he met in a train and fell in love with. FTII, Pune graduate, **Kundan Shah**'s very first film, *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron* ("Who pays the piper?", 1983) became a box-office success for hilarious and witty exposure of wrongdoings of a multi-millionnaire. A tabloid newspaper engages two awkward photographers to hunt a rich real-estate promoter, which takes them through a series of weird incidents, involving even the city commissioner. The film exposes the government machinery, the media and the judiciary, all in a hilarious way. His next film, *Kabhi Haan Kabhi Naan* ('Sometimes Yes, Sometimes No' 1993) turned out to be a musical commercial, followed by *Kya Kehna* ('What to Say?', 2000) about a college girl (Preity Zinta), who wants to become an unwed mother. She rejects her callous fiancé who gave her up and goes over to a caring friend and marries him. *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron* is often cited as an ideal offbeat film that can become a box-office success, while retaining its offbeat ethos.

Vinod Pande's very moving film, *Ek Baar Phir* ('Once Again', 1979) is about a young woman (Deepti Naval) who discovers that she has no common interest with her husband, a film star. On a trip to London with him, she resolves to follow her own interests, encourages a lover and resolves her dilemma, whether she should pursue her interests, or sacrifice them to be a true self-effacing Hindu wife. It was the first Hindi

film to be shot in England. Pande's second film, *Yeh Nazdeekiyan* ('Intimacies', 1983) is about a wife, determined to make something of herself and her life.

Shivendra Sinha's only feature, *Phir Bhi* ('All Alike', 1969) is about a telephone operator whose Electra-like obsession with the memories of her dead father inhibit her so much that she cannot even speak to young people she comes across, far less fall in love. Her mother, a university teacher, makes her face life and become independent. **Aruna Raje** and **Vikas Desai** who married soon after passing out from the FTII, Pune, made two films, jointly as **Aruna-Vikas- Shaque** ('Suspicion', 1979) about a blackmail and murder and *Gehrayee* ('Depth', 1981) about a family breaking under the belief that they are possessed by evil spirits; **Aruna** alone directed *Rihaae* ('Liberation', 1981), featuring Hema Malini on the exodus of workers from Gujarat villages and its impact on their conjugal relations.

Vidhu Vinod Chopra, also a Pune FTII alumni, made a crime thriller, *Sazaaye Maut* ('Death Penalty', 1981) and a suspenseful film-within-film, *Khamosh* ('Silent', 1986), *Parinda* ('Bird', 1989) and *1942: A Love Story* (1993), a romance in the backdrop of the turmoil, caused by the August 1942 Revolution, following 'Quit India' call by Mahatma Gandhi. The last became a megahit all over India for its juvenile romance and lilting songs.

Aditya Bhattacharya, son of Basu Bhattacharya, made *Raakh* ('Ashes', 1988) about the downhill moral journey of a rake in Mumbai. A well-to-do youngster, Aamir takes to crime after the gang rape of his girl friend by a mafia don and his friends in the mute presence of him and a police officer. The police officer tries to help him but is suspended. Out of job, he joins with Aamir to liquidate the don and his gang, while the girl re-arranges her life, overcoming the trauma. His soul is slowly brutalised as he is caught in the vortex of crime, passion and violence in the mega city. *Raakh* made it to the Indian Panorama, next year.

Other offbeat Hindi films which made it to the Indian Panorama are *Dharavi* by **Sudhir Mishra**, *Prahaar* by **Nana Patekar**, *Jo Jeeta Wohi Sikander* by **M H Khan**-all in 1992, *Patang* (1993) by **Goutam Ghosh** and *Aranyaka* (1993) by **A K Bir**. **Sandip Ray**, son of Satyajit, made a Hindi film on his father's script, *Target* (1994) which made it to the National Film Festival, next year. Caste feuds trap naive villagers and lead them finally to a 'frontal battle' with members of the upper castes, following the odds faced by a hired hunter.

In 2002, two Hindi films qualified for Indian Panorama- *Swaraj* ('The Little Republic', 2001) by **Anwar Jamal** and *Baaja* ('Mouth Organ', 2001) by **A K Bir**. *Swaraj* is about women members of a village *Panchayet* in Rajasthan, dominated by Rajput men who ignore their proposals for water supply and irrigation. They get into an abandoned well and as they dig, water spouts from its dried-up bed. The Collector- a woman- refuses to believe and refuses to sanction a project; male members also do not relent. In anger, women refuse to sign a road construction project, proposed by men. Refusing to buy water any more, women lay pipes in the well and take water to colonies

of low-caste people. In anger, upper-caste people destroy the pipes, at dead of night and as the leader of the women rushes to protest, she is assaulted and killed.

Arun Kukreja, rather an eccentric filmmaker, set records in making lowest-budget films. His *Dashanan* (2001) had only one character, a villain, played by Gulshan Grover, giving Ravana's point of view. In *Ashtnaayika*, he featured only Sharmila Tagore who says jokingly that Kukreja "makes films with two rupees in his pocket".

Offbeat in Urdu Cinema

Major offbeat films were also made in Urdu, which is often confused with Hindi. For example, Satyajit Ray's *Shatranj Ke Khilari* ('The Chess Players') got the President's award for 'Best Hindi Feature' film of 1977 but its dialogue is unabashedly Urdu. Many take Urdu to be a foreign language but the fact is, it was born and developed in India; it only adopted the Arabic script and drew much of its vocabulary from Arabic and Persian.

The first truly offbeat film in Urdu is M S Sathyu's *Garam Hawa* ('Hot Winds') in 1975. It received two awards from the President- one for best story and a special award for best film on national integration. Wherever shown abroad, it had a rave reception. Tom Hutchinson, writing for *Sunday Telegraph*, London waxed eloquent: "Remarkably mature, both politically and cinematically, this film is directed with rare delicacy. Several scenes, notably the death of the old grandmother at last, recapturing the lost memories of her wedding day, so long ago, are worthy of Satyajit Ray". Ray was also effusive. Reviewing it with three other full-length, and one short, offbeat films in 1974, he wrote:

"In the context of a largely themeless Hindi cinema, *Garam Hawa* goes to the other extreme of taking a story (by Ismat Chughtai) which for its theme alone would have made the film a milestone, even if it lacked other qualities....The pattern of events in *Garam Hawa* is not unique- a notable precedent being 'Professor Mamlock'- but it serves the purpose of the story extremely well. Director Sathyu's handling of it- except in a couple of extended and expendable passages in the second half- is calm, assured and entirely free from frills. There is no sign of effort in the way sympathy is built up and no didacticism. And in all this, he is helped enormously by his cast which stays on the right pitch throughout."

Just before the Partition, a Muslim shoemaker of Agra decides to stay in India but his elder brother migrates to what came to be known as Pakistan after 14th August 1947. As the border is sealed, the elder brother's son who was engaged to his daughter, is unable to return to Agra. He eventually slips through and as marriage preparations go on, he is arrested for illegal entry and taken away. Their ancestral house is declared an evacuee property and as it is allocated to a Sindhi businessman, he moves to a rented house. As communal orgies spread, the grandmother hides in a dark recess; to her the world has become 'full of terrors'. His business suffers, as he gets no loan or credit. Rising animus between Hindus and Muslims and refugees from Sind and Punjab moving

into the leather trade make him lose in competition but he carries on. His younger son graduates but gets no job for being a Muslim. Broken-hearted, he prepares to leave but on way to the station to take a train for Pakistan, he allows his son to join a procession. It appears to him 'a turning from the past towards the future; a rejection of the forces of despair, destruction and death and an affirmation of hope'. The trader joins the procession to stay in India.

Quest for 'Pure' Cinema

What distinguishes Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani from almost every other offbeat filmmaker is their radical views of cinema. They seem to be in a quest for 'pure cinema', as it were; they make films from their convictions, more to satisfy themselves than the producers or viewers. Kaul once said, his aim in filmmaking was to break the 'parasitic relationship of cinema with other arts, to destroy it in order to construct 'a purely cinematic object'. Ghatak who was a mentor of Kaul and Shahani in the FTII, Pune in 1966-'67 as Vice Principal and Professor of Film Direction, held that cinema should deal with the archetypes of 'collective unconscious', as psychologist C.G.Jung had postulated, to stir our minds deeply (more of his views figure in Chapter V on him). Kaul and Shahani, on the other hand, believe that feature films should not be 'slave to literature', or the stage, but develop its own independent idiom. They may not tell a story in the conventional sense, because they have more important things to do. Surprisingly, this radical view was expressed, some five decades before them (in 1922) by a grand man-of-letters, Rabindranath Tagore in a letter to thespian, Sisir Kumar Bhaduri's brother, Murari, out of dislike probably of a rendering of a story by him into a silent film.

"The important thing in the cinema is the flow of images. Its visual movement should be so rich as to be able to fulfil itself without the use of words. The beauty and grandeur of this form in motion has to be developed in such a way that it becomes self-sufficient without the use of words. "

Kaul and Shahani have not given up their views or practices. Both seem to have disdain for common viewers and call for education of tastes to appreciate 'pure' cinema, the kind of films they make. Like their films, their writings are often abstruse, making them impenetrable by common readers. Ray also did not want cinema to be a handmaid of literature but emphasised the importance of the story. Filmmakers who believed and practised to the contrary, could not woo the public to their *avant-garde* films, which Sen admitted in later life were 'artistic failures'.

Mani Kaul

Mani Kaul (born 1942) hailed from a Kashmiri family, settled in Rajasthan and graduated from the FTII, Pune in 1966. Next year, he made his first film- a short- *Yatrik*; three more short films followed until the NFDC helped him to make his first feature in 1969. He made deep and extensive researches in aesthetics and various aspects of Indian culture, particularly music. While in FTII, Pune he took great interest in films of Bresson,

Ozu and Tarkovsky but like Shahani- his classmate in the FTII- went through a virtual 'physical transformation' under the influence of Ritwik Ghatak. After making four short films in 1967 and 1968, Kaul made a mark with his debut, *Uski Roti* ('A Day's Bread') in 1969- the same year as Sen's *Bhuban Shome*, together giving a lead to a kind of 'wave' in Hindi cinema.

A bus conductor's wife, Balo waits on the roadside to give him his lunch. One day, she does not turn up at the specified time, as her sister had been molested. She returns to the spot and waits for him till evening, wondering, if he had gone with some other woman. The husband returns and asks her, why she was late; she replies, "It's nothing." The camera focuses on her psychology rather than on incidents. The film illustrated his pet idea of 'displacing an image from its natural state' to give it significance. He drew support to his belief from Sanskrit aesthetics of *Dhwanyalok*, a 9th century Sanskrit text by Anandavardhan. Based on a short story, the film was a bold experiment in cinematic imagery. The characters were a part of the landscape, as it were, as in a film by Robert Bresson, whom he adored. Kaul used two lenses- a 28mm wide-angle to shoot the interior of the bus and a 135mm telephoto to shoot the passing landscape from the bus window. Kaul came under severe media attack for deviating from the normal cinematic style. The FFC was also criticised for wasting public money over such experiments but some film intelligentsia defended it.

His next two features- *Ashad ka Ek Din* ('A Monsoon Day', 1971) and *Duvidha* ('Dilemma', 1973) - are more stylised and avoid the normal film language. In *Ashad ka Ek Din*, inspired by a play by Mohan Rakesh (who wrote the story of *Uski Roti*), Kaul tried to free cinema from words and script. It dealt with the dilemmas of an artist, incarnated as the Sanskrit poet and playwright, Kalidasa to choose between his lover and his duties in the court of Chandragupta in Ujjain. K K Mahajan's camerawork was sensuous and languid, particularly of the hillside where Kalidasa, Mallika and their friend Vilom meet.

Duvidha deals with an even more absurd story, of a young woman's relation with a ghost who attends her marriage and eventually falls in love with her; during her husband's absence, it even lives with her, taking a physical shape. A daughter is born to her, which she refuses to explain to her husband when he returns after three years. The ghost is exorcised and thrown into a well, which makes her languish. Kaul co-directed (with three friends- K Hariharan, Sayeed Mirza and Kamal Swaroop) *Ghasiram Kotwal* (1976) based on Vijay Tendulkar's eponymous play. It was an attempt to adapt theatre to cinema, as explained by the chorus in the beginning and a novel experiment in collective filmmaking under the banner of the film cooperative, *Yukt* that they jointly set up, that year. After producing one more film, Mirza's *Arvind Desai ki Ajeeb Dastan*, the unit closed.

His next, *Satah se Uthata Admi* ('Arising from the Surface', 1980) dwells on the writings of the Hindi poet, Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh (1917-1969), the main exponent of *Nai Kavita* movement, through three characters. Undaunted by scant public attention, Kaul made five more features- *Dhrupad* (1982), *Mati Manas* (1984), *Siddheswari*

(1989), *Nazar* (1989) and *The Idiot* (1991). He sought to create a unique film idiom, 'neither imitative nor imitable'. Kaul is truly a maker of *auteur* and *avant-garde* cinema that was then in vogue in some European countries. He relied more on intellect than on emotion: "My intellectual awareness is my equipment", he once said. Satyajit Ray was not impressed by his views and practices. Writing about *Duvidha* in an article in 1974, he said, "Kaul has wilfully adopted a very special and very private mode of expression and his impatience with conventional narrative methods leads him to a visual style, replete with clichés of another sort". Ray also alleged Kaul's 'plain lack of interest in human being' and his 'wayward, fragile aestheticism'. *Uski Roti*, *Ashad Ka Ek Din* and *Duvidha* were financed by the FFC and *Satah se Uthata Aadmi* by Madhya Pradesh Kala Parishad. *Duvidha* won the national award for best black & white photography (1969) and a silver medal at Milan Festival in 1970.

Making no distinction between feature and documentary films, Kaul made three more films, fusing the two. *Dhrupad* traces the evolution of this kind of Hindusthani classical music from its origin in tribal chants to its classical forms, obtaining in north India. The second was *Mati Manas* ('Man of Clay'), tracing the development of ceramic in the Indian subcontinent through the ages. The third, *Siddheswari* recreated the life of the eponymous *thumri* singer of Varanasi.

Kaul returned, for a while, to his kind of narrative film in *Nazar* (The Look'), based on Dostoevsky's *A Gentle Creature*, emphasizing images rather than dialogue. Dostoevsky inspired another long film- a serial in four parts- for Doordarshan, *The Idiot* (1992), still unreleased. It has over 50 characters and deals with too many events- the locales shifting between Mumbai and Goa. His latest film, *Naukar ki Kameez* ('The Servant's Shirt', 1997) could be released two years after it was made. An ordinary clerk in an anti-smuggling office in Madhya Pradesh and his wife, like everybody else around them, aspire for wealth and social uplift but in the end, return to where they were. The film deals with class distances; while senior officers live in bungalows, clerks live under leaking roofs in torrential rains. It was the opening film in 1999 Rotterdam Festival.

Kumar Shahani

Kumar Shahani, born in 1940 in Sind (now in Pakistan) two years before Mani Kaul, holds similar beliefs about cinema. They came to know each other while studying in FTII, Pune and nurtured similar views about cinema and other arts. Ritwik Ghatak who was then Vice Principal of the FTII saw promise in him; "Kumar Shahani is my best student; when he comes out with his films, it will be staggering". Graduating from Bombay University, he studied Sanskrit and history under the Marxist historian, D D Kosambi who also deeply influenced him. After graduating from FTII, he went to Paris on a French government scholarship to study cinema at the Institute of Higher Studies in Cinema (IDHEC). There he used to see three to four films a day at the *Cinematheque Francois* and assisted Robert Bresson in shooting *Uné Femmé Doucé*. Back home, he studied the epic dimensions of the *Mahabharata*, Buddhist iconography, classical Indian music and the *Bhakti* movement under a two-year Homi Bhaba fellowship. Like Kaul, he also made

five short films from 1966 before making his first full-length feature, *Maya Darpan* (The Magic Mirror', 1972). A lonely daughter of a rather authoritarian employee of a small princely State, scooped in a Rajasthani mansion, makes love to an engineer and has sex with him, defying social norms. Being a slow movie and a collage of visuals and images, it went over the heads of common cinegoers; it earned him the critics' label, 'European in sensibility'. The FFC which sponsored it also came under criticism for wasting public money on such a 'personal' film. Ray also deplored the 105-minute film for its 'lack of humour'. However, though not released commercially, it received two national awards-for best Hindi film and excellence in colour photography; it was 'specially mentioned' by the Locarno Festival Jury for 'courage and vigour' in 1973.

For making his second feature, *Tarang* ('The Wave', 1982) Shahani took a loan from the NFDC but as the producer withdrew, fearing loss, it had to be produced by the NFDC. For 12 years, the Corporation was not well-disposed toward him because of the adverse criticism of *Maya Darpan*. Made in cinemascope, *Tarang* featured noted offbeat artistes- Smita Patil, Om Puri, Girish Karnad and Amol Palekar- playing roles from diverse social classes. For each of them, he "tried to bring out a series of perspectives so that the spectator can see 'beyond' them and thereby go back to his own personal perspective and reflect on it". Spanning three hours, *Tarang* was a 'complex and violent melodrama' about various tensions in a rich industrial family of Mumbai. He made it in an 'epic form', like Eisenstein, Godard and Ionesco, transposing the class struggles in the *Mahabharata* to the modern days, (like Shyam Benegal in *Kalyug* earlier, in 1980) but not very convincingly. It did not make a mark on either mainstream, or offbeat, cinema.

Shahani's next feature *Khayal Gatha* ('The Saga of *Khayal*', 1988) came four years later. It explores through images the essence of *khayal*, a form of Hindusthani classical music, originating in Persia and sung with flexibility and improvisations, mainly in north and eastern India.

His 1990 film, *Kasba* ('The Village') is adapted from a story by Anton Chekhov, 'In the Ravine'. In a Kangra valley village lives a merchant who amasses a fortune by selling stale food and goods with the help of a pretty daughter-in-law, Tejo. Her husband is mentally retarded but she is very ambitious. The merchant's eldest son, who has also made a fortune by dealing in fake money in Delhi, returns to the village to marry a local girl amid flowing liquor. He gives a lot of fake money to guests and on return to Delhi is arrested and jailed. In the village, the wife delivers a son whom Tejo kills in a fit of rage, having doubts about its father. She also chases away its mother who roams about with her dead child in the hills. The merchant is arrested for smuggling. Tejo takes over his property and assets, starts a brick factory and indulges in local politics. Shahani alludes to Kangra miniature paintings and diverse musical traditions, reflecting the ambience and psychology of characters.

His next, *Bhavantarana* (1991) is on a popular classical dance form, *Odissi*, prevalent in Orissa and popularised by a great exponent, Kelu Charan Mahapatra. Like

Kaul, he merged the distinction between fiction and documentary genres; a thin narrative runs through both *Khayal Gatha* and *Bhavantarana*.

His next film came seven years later. *Char Adhyaya* ('Four Chapters', 1998), produced by the NFDC, is made on Rabindranath Tagore's eponymous novel, on which Paul Zils, a German-born documentary-maker under the title, *Zalzala*, featuring Shambhu and Tripti Mitra of *Bohurupee*. K K Mahajan photographed it and Vanraj Bhatia composed its score. In it, he sought 'to harmonise the inherent aspects of painting, music, theatre and dance in cinema', which to him is 'a very developed eclectic art'. An educated and spirited woman works with an underground anarchist group to wrest India's independence from the British. She falls in love with its leader who eventually kills her. Shahani called it a "homage to Tagore, to Ghatak and to all those who have made our lives liveable, whether they be from the crowded streets of Kolkata, or from some faraway country, full of love and laughter". It got into some trouble with the censors, as they would not allow a crucial scene in which the heroine shows her bosom and turns back nude, as her lover prepares to kill her with a morphine injection. It was her final move to beg her life; it was there in Tagore's novel and without it, the story would be meaningless.

Returning to his passion for music, Shahani made his next film on the Indian bamboo flute, calling it *Bansuri* (1999). He mixed apparently contrary genres through its strains; a *Bharatnatyam* artisté dances to a north Indian *raga* and a flute recital by Pannalal Ghosh and Hariprasad Chaurasia mingle with Carnatic *ragas* on instruments by T R Mahalingam, N Ramani and Vishwa. The film has been screened once only, in a Mumbai festival. It is produced by the Ministry of External Affairs for screenings abroad. Shahani has announced his next film, *Sarpam* in Malayalam, based on an eponymous novel by M Govindan. Shahani's next feature *Khayal Gatha* ('The Saga of *Khayal*', 1988) came four years later. It explores through images the essence of *khayal*, a form of Hindusthani classical music, originating in Persia and sung with flexibility and improvisations, mainly in north and eastern India. His next, *Bhavantarana* (1991) is on a popular classical dance form, *Odissi*, prevalent in Orissa and popularised by a great exponent, Kelu Charan Mahapatra. Like Kaul, he merged the distinction between fiction and documentary genres; a thin narrative runs through both *Khayal Gatha* and *Bhavantarana*.

Like Kaul, Shahani is not keen on telling a story through 'over-obvious plotting', as Derek Malcolm of *The Guardian* weekly said of *Maya Darpan*, as much as in giving a 'lyrical framework' and a 'universe of sighs'. His views on cinema are very original like his films. In the introduction of a book published from Paris in 1990, *Cinema & Television*, he wrote:

"The cinema, along with cubism, dynamised our ways of seeing...In fetishising the cultural object, in making the cultural appear as natural, the cinema denied it both its poetry and its praxis. The transparency of the image renders its object opaque."

One strong point of Shahani is the use of colour. Every tint is used thoughtfully to symbolise something. Louis Marcorelles observed in *Le Monde*: "He makes colour work

for him; he captures spaces, makes you actually feel the weight of objects, fabrics, light itself’.

M F Hussain

An abstract painter whose works sell at astronomical prices and exhibited in foreign salons, auctions, exhibitions and galleries, the world over, Maqbul Fida Hussain made three films which defy categorisation. They are neither offbeat in the usual sense nor mainstream; nor are they documentaries. They could be called ‘surrealist’ in the sense Salvador Dali’s famous paintings are. The first, *Through the Eyes of a Painter* (1963), made for the Films Division, is like a moving canvas, depicting vignettes of Rajasthan-peacocks, forts, deserts, sand dunes, a hurricane lamp and an old man’s walking stick.

The next, *Gaja Gamini* (‘The Lady with an Elephantine Gait’, 2000) came 37 years after his debut featuring, and solely about, a ravishing Hindi actress, Madhuri Dixit who infatuated him so much that he saw a Hindi blockbuster, *Hum Aapke Hai Kaun?* (“Who are we to you?”, 1994) featuring her, incredibly more than 80 times. It was premiered in Berlin in September 2000. Among the few who saw it, Mrinal Sen described it as ‘an audio-visual wonder’. Madhuri Dixit appears in four incarnations- as a blind singer (Sangeeta), as Kalidasa’s Shakuntala, as a new millenium woman Monica Mathur and the lady of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*. Hussain does not follow chronology but rather eccentrically “mixes time, characters and places, as if in a mixer”. For example, in one scene, Kamdev (the Hindu god of love) lands at Ujjain as Kalidasa, hires a bicycle to go to India Coffee House to meet Tansen and Urdu and Hindi poets- Mir, Daag and Muktibodh.

In 2003, he completed another feature, *Meenaxi: A Tale of Three Cities*, shot in Hyderabad, Jaisalmer and Prague, featuring Hindi actress, Tabu in the title role. It is about a writer and the conflicts he has with his created characters. Explaining the theme, he said, “There is a hero within every writer and there are various layers in the relationship that a writer has with his or her characters.” Hussain believes, his “foray into the world of films is another way of discovering new parameters of creativity.

XI. Offbeat in Bengali Cinema

"We have chosen for ourselves the field of the intimate cinema: the cinema of mood and atmosphere rather than of grandeur and spectacle."

—*Satyajit Ray*

In spite of its virtual birth and early luxurious growth in Kolkata, the offbeat genre is still precarious in the city. Some half a dozen directors have kept it alive, in the face of enormous odds of finance, distribution and exhibition. The patronage of Bengali cinema has shifted from the middle class to the rural poor and the lumpen. Ordinary Bengali films, these days, have insignificant, or no, story and soak with sentiment, maudlin characterisation, unnecessary and often phoney violence and sex in the manner of Hindi commercials. Titles, themes and even formats of many commercially successful Bengali films emulate those of *Jatra*, or the Bengali folk play, incredible in a tradition, nourished by Ray, Ghatak and Sen. Nonetheless, the second and third generation offbeat directors are making films in the genre without defecting to the mainstream, or yielding to its ingredients. Ubiquitous interest in literature, music and other arts also whet desire in youngsters of making, appearing in, or writing about films.

In 2003, Bengali offbeat films, surprisingly, did very well and some were box-office successes too. Their makers won quite a few national awards for 2002. Aparna Sen got the 'Best Director' award for her *Mr. & Mrs. Iyer*; her daughter, Konkana got the 'Best Actress' award for her performance in the same film. The 'Best Film' of the year award went, for the fourth time, to a Buddhadev Dasgupta's *Manda Meyer Upakhyan*, which was also shown and awarded in a number of major foreign festivals, besides doing well in box-office. Abhik Mukherjee was adjudged the 'Best Cameraman' for his work in *Patalghar*. The 'Best First Film' award went to Abhijit Choudhury (*Patalghar*) and Subhadra Choudhury (*Prahar*) jointly. The Chairman of the Jury, Prakash Jha said, "There is a revival of Bengali cinema...there's been a good crop of films, despite the general decline in filmmaking standards".

Gautam Ghosh

Born on 24th July 1950 in Kolkata (his ancestors lived in Faridpur in Bangladesh, which allies him with Mrinal Sen), he took to theatre and photo journalism after graduating from Calcutta University. His deep interest in cinema made him see a large number of Western film classics, of which he liked the films of 'anarchic' directors, like Louis Bunuel, Dali and Andy Warhol. He admitted to living, for a while, 'a real anarchic life' in early youth. He made shorts, documentaries and advertisement films from his early

1920s; a documentary, *Hungry Autumn* was even noticed in Oberhausen and Leipzig Festivals.

Curiously, his first feature film was in Telugu, called *Maa Bhoomi* ('Our Land') in 1979, based on a story by Krishan Chander and set in the background of a peasant uprising, called Telengana movement, inspired by the Communist Party in the late 1940s. Ghosh gave vent to his sympathy and support to the cause of the extremists with whom, like Utpalendu Chakravorty, he had links in early youth, although he did not take part in their movement.

His Bengali debut after three documentaries and *Maa Bhoomi* was *Dakhal* ('The Occupation') in 1981. Produced by the West Bengal Government on a story by Sushil Jana, the film is about a woman of an Andhra nomadic tribe, called 'crow-hunters', who roam around in south Bengal for a living through occult practices. She (Mamata Shankar) and a man she had eloped with, settle on the newly risen shoal of a river in south Bengal. The man dies of snakebite, while ploughing. The local landlord tries to grab the land she had occupied, by disproving her right, with the help of a revenue collector, a tribe leader. Her hut is set on fire but when the tribe leader offers to protect her, she refuses and decides to stay back and fight for her land alone. It was awarded the President's 'Golden Lotus' for the Best Feature film of 1981 and won the Grand Prize of the Jury at the XI International Human Rights Film Festival at Paris in 1983.

His best known film, *Paar* ('The Crossing') came next, in 1984. It aroused expectations, even before it was released, for its striking story by Samarendra Bose, a major Bengali novelist. In a Bihar village, huts of Harijan labours are set on fire by an upper-caste landlord to avenge their electing a Harijan as village headman and agitating for minimum wages, led by a school teacher. They are pulled out of their homes and hideouts and gunned. Among the few who escape this carnage (many such incidents actually occurred in the 1980s in caste-ridden Bihar) are a poor farm labour and his pregnant wife. The police, the press and the bureaucracy swoop down on the village and zero in on the landlord who had also killed many of them. The landlord's bragging brother kills the teacher. As justice becomes a farce, a poor labourer (Naseeruddin Shah) in vengeance kills the landlord's brother with the help of some angry villagers. To retaliate, the landlord's men kill all villagers. The labourer and his pregnant wife, helped by the teacher's wife, escape to Kolkata where they roam hungry and without shelter until they reach a suburb. They look for job in jute mills on the eastern bank of the Ganga, unsuccessfully. His wife's delivery approaches and hunger stares them in the face. A person offers them 20 rupees if they chase a herd of swine across the swollen Ganga to the other bank. Having no choice, they complete the task with great risk and stress and get the paltry money. Being exhausted, as they lie down on a field to sleep, they wonder, if the unborn baby is alive. He puts his ear on the wife's womb and hears it ticking 'with the small silent voice of life'. *Paar* caused a sensation when it was released. Naseeruddin Shah, who played the absconding labour, got the best actor's prize at Venice and the film won the UNESCO Solidarity Award for 1984.

Subsequent feature films of Ghosh kept up the promise. His next, *Antarjali Jatra* ('The Voyage Beyond', 1987) was based on a story by Kamal Kumar Majumdar (a learned and witty friend of Satyajit Ray and Chidananda Dasgupta), written in archaic Bengali of early 19th century. *Antarjali Jatra* retained the spirit of the original story, set in the 1830s when Raja Ram Mohan Roy was crusading against burning Hindu widows on husbands' piers (*Sati*), which had just been banned by the British Indian Government in Kolkata. Kins of a dying *Kulin* (superior) Brahmin leave him on the bank of the Ganga under a belief that death on the holy riverbed guarantees the soul's journey to heaven. A palmist foretells another marriage and the wife committing *Sati*. A poor Brahmin, lured by the prospect of *punya* (virtue) and passage to heaven, marries off her young daughter to the dying Brahmin. She attends on him but knows that she would have to commit *sati* when he dies. A cremator (*Dom*), an untouchable Hindu, takes pity on her and advises her to flee from the grim end but she stays on. As her dying husband appears to be returning to life, she goes closer to the voluble cremator in a moonlit night and has sex with him in the mud. A high tide sweeps away the Brahmin, one night, when she is meeting her lover in a nearby hut. She runs back and jumps into the furious river, trying to rescue him but is also swept away; she thus performs a new kind of *Sati*, by drowning with her husband. The film won the President's award for Best Bengali film of 1987 and was shown in the Cannes Festival, next year, in the *Un Certain Regard* section.

After making a serial for Doordarshan on some Tagore stories, Ghosh got an offer from a Dhaka producer, *Ashirvad Chalachitra* to film Manik Bandopadhyaya's great novel, *Padma Nadir Majhi* ('The Boatman of Padma') in 1992; the West Bengal government sponsored it. Like Rajen Tarafdar's *Ganga*, Ramu Kariat's *Chemmen* and Ritwik Ghatak's *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam*, it too was a tale of a fishing community living on the banks of the turbulent river, Padma, a branch of the Ganga, flowing into the Bay of Bengal- their precarious lives, loves and affairs, the beacon and dream of a better life on a remote island, *Moyna Dweep*, bought on lease by a visionary among them. Two of the main casts came from Bangladesh and the film's exotic scenes, fine editing and East Bengal's folk music made it an engrossing film. Although it did not have the rave reception of *Paar*, artistically it was a better film. It got President's award for the Best Bengali Film of the year and a jury appreciation in the Cannes Festival, 1993.

Ghosh made his next film, *Patang* ('The Kite', 1993) in Hindi. For the first time, he infused some commercial ingredients in the film, featuring Shabana Azmi and Om Puri. A boy in his teens (played by Syed Shafique, who played the hero in Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay*, 1988) indulges in kite flying in his house near a railway station in south Bihar. His mother is a maid in the house of a small-time gangster (Om Puri), who steals construction materials from passing goods trains. The pilferages alter relations in a slum which has links with criminals, politicians, the local *nouveau rich* and the bureaucracy. Through a skein of complex events, the gangster makes the boy a scapegoat to divert the attention of railway employees from his gang. Fed up with the murky adult world, he returns to the bosom of his mother.

His 1997 film, *Gudia* ('The Doll'), also in Hindi, is based on a story by Mahasweta

Devi. With seven songs and other commercial claptrap, accompanying a ventriloquist's shows, it became a virtual musical but did not have box-office success. The leader of an itinerant troupe- also an actor and ventriloquist- pulls crowd with a talking animated doll, which he named after the Hindu celestial beauty, Urvashi. Throat cancer makes him sell the doll to a musician of his troupe, who returns to Mumbai to earn by showing the doll, which he calls his wife. A clever politician, lured by its commercial prospects, tries to hijack his shows, as the doll speaks of various injustices in the society, which draws a huge crowd. During an election meeting, the doll goes mute, attracting the wrath of the politician's henchmen who destroy it and beat up the musician. Shot in picturesque locations in Mumbai and Goa, it became an allegory on repression of freedom of speech, enforced by internal Emergency, proclaimed in 1975.

His more successful next feature film in Bengali, *Dekha* (2001) is about a former landlord of Kolkata, who in his youth wrote poetry and indulged in intellectual discussions. His wife has left him because of his pleasure-seeking outside home. He goes blind and lives with his visual memories in the falling mansion of his ancestors. His former teacher's daughter, a divorcee, comes to see him and he gives her and her son shelter under his roof. Ghosh wrote the story and with Bengali writer, Sunil Ganguly, jointly wrote the script.

A prolific director, he came out with a sequel to Satyajit Ray's *Aranyer Din Ratri* ('Days & Nights in a Forest', 1970), titled *Aabar Aranye* ('In the Forest Again', 2003). The four Kolkata young men, who went on a holiday to a forest and got into affairs with local women in 1970 in Ray's film, have in three decades prospered in life. They decide to go to another forest and a tea garden in north Bengal with their offsprings and sons-in-law. They make merry in a forest at night when the daughter of one is abducted by tribals. Their non-tribal leader demands a high ransom but before the couple decides to pay, the police come to know and rescue the girl from a tribal hideout. Many sequences harked back (e.g. memory game), or referred to, the ones in Ray's film but overall, it lacked the cohesion and compactness of *Aranyer Din Ratri*. The same artistes, by now older by 32 years, (except one, played by Robi Ghosh who died a few years ago) did the roles with one mainstream actress from Mumbai, Tabu in the role of the abducted girl.

Buddhadev Dasgupta

Buddhadev Dasgupta, born in 1944 in Purulia district of West Bengal, came to Kolkata to study and after passing M.A. in Economics, taught in a college for eight years, from 1968. He was writing poetry when he made his debut feature, *Dooratwa* ('The Distance') in 1978, pooling resources. It was about the mental distance of a Marxist college lecturer from his wife, leading to separation. The film was a study of male chauvinism, coming in the way of women's happiness. It received the President's Award for Best Bengali Film of 1978 as well as two private awards for best direction and screenplay.

Giving up the college job, Dasgupta kept on making low-budget films; next year came his second, *Neem Annapurna* ('Bitter Morsel', 1979) on an unbearably stark and

morbid story by Kamal Kumar Majumdar about hunger in a rural migrant family in a Kolkata slum. A laid-off factory worker remains jobless, while the family starves; his wife contemplates selling her body and a daughter steal the rice of a beggar who dies of hunger. They cook it but every morsel tastes bitter. The film won the President's award for best black & white photography and shared a Special Jury Award at Karlovy Vary in 1980.

Three years later came his much better film, *Grihayuddha* ('Crossroads', 1982), produced by the West Bengal government. Its story by Dibyendu Palit dealt with the confusion and contradictions in leftist intellectuals who 'betrayed' the Communist Revolution by compromising principles. Avowedly inspired by the Greek director, Constantin Costa-Gavras (Dasgupta adores Bresson, Fassbinder, Bergman and Mizoguchi too), it is the story of an investigative journalist whose probe into the murder of a trade unionist by the owner of a steel factory is hindered by the chief editor. The sister of the killed approaches her lover, a former revolutionary, who had become a wealthy sales representative in a small town, forgetting his Marxist ideals. The girl after a long wait breaks with him. The journalist is murdered; the former revolutionary feels a void, swinging between cynicism and social ambition. In theme and treatment, it was typically offbeat and won the FIPRESCI Award at Venice.

Dasgupta's next film in Hindi, *Andhi Gali* ('Blind Alley', 1984), on another Dibyendu Palit story, carried forward the theme of downfall of Marxist ideologues and activists. A school teacher gets involved in extremist politics, and as the police look for him, he tries to escape. However, he is caught and along with some other comrades, faces a firing squad. He is lucky to survive by a last-minute fiat but as his party cannot give him refuge, he escapes to Mumbai. He gets a job in a company and in five years becomes a Sales Officer. He joins the so-called 'rat race' to climb the social ladder, which he used to hate and falls in love with a friend's cousin sister. He marries her and brings her to Mumbai where he dreams of owning a luxurious flat. As loans run short, he persuades her to model for an advertising agency, much to her distaste. They are able to buy, and move into, the luxurious flat. The agency lures them with more money and asks her to wear scanty clothes to model as a tribal girl. Her husband urges her to comply, as with the money he can pay the last instalment. As she refuses, he beats her up; the same night, she jumps from her flat on the fifth floor and dies.

Dasgupta likes to depict the plight of the middle class and the poor- their confusions and contradictions. *Phera* ('The Return', 1986) deals with the conflicts in an once-affluent actor of folk plays, called *Jatra* in Bengal and his gradual degradation, as people in a cinema-age no longer see them. The theme was treated in another variation in his next feature, *Bagh Bahadur* (1989), dealing with the increasing unpopularity of a village dancer in tiger's skin and mimicking the animal's movements, which no longer amuse villagers after the advent of the cinema and television. In anger and desperation, he jumps into a tiger's cage in a touring circus and engages it in a hand-to-hand fight, embracing, inevitably, a tragic end.

His next film, *Tahader Katha* ('Their Story', 1992) was produced by the NFDC, based again on another Kamal Kumar Majumdar story. Coming out of a jail after 11 years, prematurely aged, a freedom fighter is disillusioned by post-Independent India which is a caricature of his vision of free India; he finds the society very alien too. His former political colleagues want him to canvass for a party candidate but he finds them not answering to his dream. Everybody takes him for mad, except his young son who was born after he had gone to the jail. His wife and daughter want to chain him down but forewarned by his son, he flees. In a show that night, a magician after hypnotising him, makes him chew tree leaves like a goat and asks him to lick saliva from his palm. He gets out of the trance and strangles the magician to death for mocking him. He is taken to have gone utterly mad, put on chains and sent to a mental asylum.

In 1994, came his poetic film, *Charachar* ('Shelter of the Wings'), answering to his belief that film should be more akin to poetry. It is about a poor bird-catcher's transformation- from a seller of birds for livelihood to their liberator for fancy, which makes him poorer and a butt of his community. He takes birds to be 'visitors from other planets' and cannot forget his dead child who buried a dead bird, believing that it would sprout and give forth a tree of birds. It was adjudged the 'best feature film of 1993' and acclaimed in many foreign festivals. Flights of sea and forest birds and their varied cries and calls in forest and seascapes made it very poetic.

Rather surrealistic and hauntingly poetic is his next feature, *Lal Darja* ('The Red Door', 1996). A noted dental surgeon of Kolkata is bored with life in a kind of male menopause and consults a psychoanalyst. His wife leaves him in disgust, takes up a teaching job and meets an old flame. His son, studying in a Darjeeling school, stops ringing him up after seeing him beat his mother. He wanders in his car and envies the driver who enjoys life with his three wives. He longs to return to his innocent and happy childhood when a 'red door' opens to freedom and beauty. Red becomes a recurrent motif, sprinkled liberally on frames from extracted blood-stained teeth to a red van.

Dasgupta got the Best Director's award in Venice Festival in September 2000 for his next film, *Uttara* (2000), a rare honour that made him an international celebrity, as Satyajit Ray became after his *Aparajito* got the Best Film award in the same festival in 1956. Two ordinary railway employees in a rural station aspire to become railway guards. One of them marries a girl, Uttara with whom the friend falls in love. A Hindu chauvinist terrorises local Christians, sets fire to a church and kills the priest; his gang rapes Uttara; this is similar to a real incident in Orissa where Hindu fanatics burnt alive a German Christian missionary and his two children.

His next feature, *Manda Meyer Upakhyān* ('Tale of a Naughty Girl', 2002) also kept up his steady reputation. In 1969, a young woman, rejected by her husband, joins a rural brothel to survive. She is so poor that not being able to pay for a ride, she offers her body to the driver of a cinema-owner's station wagon. Some villagers surrender to the driver an old couple with none to look after, for admitting them in a hospital but not finding any, he leaves them on the roadside. A cinema-hall owner sees only blue films and visits a young prostitute, whose pretty teenage daughter does well in school. The

married, middle-aged man takes a fancy for the daughter and proposes to her mother to marry and keep her in a riverine house, away from his family. The mother wants her to marry the libidinous man but she flees, one night, and boards a train for Kolkata. All this happens when Neil Armstrong walks on the moon and astronomical discoveries reveal an expanding universe.

Seven of his films qualified for Indian Panorama- *Dooratwa*, *Grihayuddha*, *Aandhi Gali*, *Phera*, *Tahader Katha*, *Charachar* and *Lal Darja* and many of them were awarded at home and abroad. Through his films runs a streak of political despair and cynicism. Commercial prospects do not lure him, or make him compromise, because he finds that if a film runs in a modest chain for six weeks, it recoups the investment. He is fiercely offbeat and pleads for government initiative in production of offbeat films. However, he expects minimum commercial viability of offbeat films because “the real support of a film should come from the audience”. He believes that films rooted in the soil, will not fail to move and more than awards, he cherishes the ‘appreciation of the audience’. Like Pattabhi Rama Reddy of Kannada cinema, he pleads for allying cinema with poetry.

“In poetry I perceive a pattern arising from the verbal signs, which appears, shifts and dissolves in the mind. When I began to make films, my only desire was to produce those non-static images that I had seen behind closed eyes.”

Utpalendu Chakravorti

Utpalendu Chakravorti leapt to fame with his second feature, *Chokh* (‘The Eyes’) in 1982. He was influenced in boyhood by Marxist literature; growing up, he got involved in Bengal’s extremist politics of the late 1960s, originating in Naxalbari in Darjeeling district, after which the extremists began to be called as ‘Naxalites’ (also title of a film by K A Abbas). After passing M.A. in History, he secretly joined the peasants’ struggle, led by Naxalites and lived with tribals and poor peasants, almost in hiding, for a few years. Taken seriously ill, he returned to Kolkata and became a teacher in a school. While writing short stories, the idea of making a film, using his experience of the extremist movement, occurred to him.

He entered cinema with a documentary, *Mukti Chai* (‘Wanted Freedom’, 1977) about cruelty to under-trial prisoners, detained during the Emergency (1975-’77). The idea blossomed further in his feature debut, *Moyna Tadanta* (‘Post Mortem’, 1980), set in forests and tribal villages where he had extensively roamed. It was his own story about the oppression of tribals by the police and other government functionaries whom Naxalites sought to eliminate. It was avowedly a political film, like Sen’s *Mrigaya* (1976) but not as artistic. The President gave it the award for ‘Best First Film of a Director’, as did Amiens Film Festival in France in 1981.

Its success took him finally out of the extremist movement (but not the ethos); he devoted himself to filmmaking. Next film, *Chokh* (‘The Eyes’, 1982) made a far greater impact and apart from two national awards for best feature film and direction, it won a

significant award in Berlin Festival in 1983 and a Special Jury Prize in Delhi, the same year. It was also based on his own story about big-money politics perverting justice. A convict (Om Puri) donates his eyes before being hanged but a rich trader deprives an ordinary patient, needing corneal grafting, for getting them for his son.

His third feature, *Deb Shishu* ('The Child God', 1985), produced by the NFDC and again based on his own story, was about a freak child with three heads, born to a poor rural couple. They give it to a *Tantrik*- a practitioner of Hindu black magic- who publicises it as a child god, possessing divine power of curing diseases and giving boons. The couple leaves home in dire want and lives in the cowshed of the wife's brother in another village. On way to a village market one day, the husband queues before a tent to see the child god whom he recognises as none other than his freak son. He demands his share of the booty from the conman but his goons chase him away. Hearing of the transformation of her freak son, his wife pines to see it. He gets into a fury over his folly in selling the child, beats and rapes her, telling perversely to conceive another deformed child who could bring them fortune. The wife dreams of incarnating as goddess *Kali* and beheading the *tantrik* who bought her freak child. Awake, she returns to her joyless life and weeps inconsolably. *Deb Sishu* won two awards at Locarno Festival in 1986 for best direction ('Jury of Youth Gold Medal') and another from Ecumenical Jury.

His third film, shown in the 1990 Indian Panorama, *Chhandaneer* ('The Nest of the Rhythm', 1989) is about a *Bharatnatyam* dancer, who marries a blind classical musician, despite opposition by her parents. Years later, when the musician descends to make 'pop' music and compose for commercial films, she runs away to preserve her art. Being deeply interested in music and an admirer of Ray, Utpalendu made a short documentary, 'The Music of Satyajit Ray' and another on a noted exponent of Tagore's songs, *Rabindrasangeet*, Debabrata Biswas. He veered to making films for Kolkata Doordarshan and after making six, including *Private Tutor*, a moving tale of unsuccessful romance between a tutor and a girl pupil (a common occurrence), took a long gap.

He returned to filmmaking in 2000 with a feature, *Aparichita* on a very moving Tagore story for a Bengali TV channel. The marriage of a city girl with a wealthy boy breaks on the wedding night, when her doctor father refuses to weigh the gold ornaments at the behest of the groom's guardian, a maternal uncle. The boy does not protest but years later, when he waits in a station to board a train with his mother with a confirmed reservation ticket, railway officers do not allow him on the plea that his bogie is reserved for the military. A woman travelling with some school children protests and defying railway officers takes them in her compartment. He recognises the woman as his missed wife and apologises for his timidity. Utpalendu has considerable interest and expertise in music, particularly *Rabindra Sangeet*, which he makes good use of in his films.

Chidananda Dasgupta

Born in Hazaribagh (then in Bihar, now in Jharkhand), Dasgupta is more renowned as a film writer than their maker. He made his debut feature, *Bilet Pherat* ('England

Returned') in 1972- a three-in-one 'black comedy' about three UK-returned young men who cannot make their idealism work in India. Notable of these was *Rakta* ('Blood'), reissued later as a separate film, about an Oxford-returned Kolkata young man who is forced by his conservative family to give up his jobs- first of a college lecturer and then of an executive in a British firm. He starts his own business of making fertiliser from animal blood but incurs losses until multi-national interests take it over.

He made his second feature, *Amodini* (1995)- 23 years after his first- a period piece set in 18th century Bengal, when Kulin (superior) Brahmins could marry many women but live with few. In such a milieu, a *zeminder*'s fanciful daughter, Amodini is forced to marry a servant boy in the household, as the *Kulin* groom does not turn up. Spurned by her in the marriage night, he flees to Kolkata, earns a fortune through business and returns a rich man with another wife from the city. Amodini, fallen on hard times meanwhile, returns to him, shedding her arrogance. He lives with two wives, happily thereafter, being himself a *Kulin* Brahmin.

Sandip Ray

Sandip Ray learnt filmmaking from his illustrious father, Satyajit and before making his debut, *Phatik Chand* (1983) got a chance to complete the outdoor shooting of Ray's *Ghare Baire* (1983), as he was disabled by a cardiac stroke. *Phatik Chand* is about a city boy fleeing home and coming across an itinerant magician who takes him to various places and in the end returns him to his parents, severing an emotional bond. While his father was still alive, Sandip made the promised (by Ray in the end of *Hirak Rajar Deshe*) third sequel of Goopy-Bagha trilogy, *Goopy Bagha Phirey Elo* (1991). A year after his father's death, he made *Uttaran* ('The Broken Journey', 1993) on Ray's script. All these did well in box-office, because in public imagination, they were virtually his father's ideas, executed by him. *Uttaran* is about a Kolkata doctor who is so used to treat the idle rich that he is at a loss to treat a pneumonia patient whom he comes across on roadside while driving to Durgapur to attend a seminar. He remembers the Hippocratic Oath and realizes that the advances in modern medicine are for the rich; the poor cannot afford them.

He veered to making serials for television on his father's and others' stories, one of them featuring Feluda, Ray's Sherlock Holmes. He also made a documentary on singer Kishore Kumar, a family friend and a number of serials on Doordarshan on his father's stories. His latest film, *Bombaiyer Bombete* on a Feluda story by his father was released in early 2004 and did well in box-office. Sandeep Ray (Junior) made *Himghar* (1987) on frozen relations in a family, as its members break away to live separately in a big city.

Tapan Sinha

Generally regarded as a great maker of 'middle cinema', many of Tapan Sinha's films in a prolific career spanning 50 years, are akin to offbeat. Out of some two dozen

films that he made after 1969, at least half a dozen films deserve the offbeat rubric- *Andhar Periyē* (1973), *Adalat-O-Ekti Meye* (1981), *Aadmi Aur Aurat* (1984), *Aatanka* (1986), *Ek Doctor ki Maut* (1990) and *Shatabdir Kanya* (2002). Satyajit Ray showered high praises on *Aadmi Aur Aurat*, a tale of mute love and solicitude between a Muslim woman and a Hindu labourer who helps her reach a hospital to deliver her first baby along forest trek and amid swirling flood water. *Adalat-O-Ekti Meye* is also a very moving film on the social repercussions of rape of a middle-class girl in the coastal water of Bay of Bengal coast at Puri by four Bengali youth. *Aatanka* was about a teacher's dilemma, confronted with an anti-social pupil who commits a murder in broad daylight which he happens to see from a distance. The pupil threatens him with dire consequences, if he divulged his name but the teacher summons courage to get him arrested by the police, besides himself punishing him. *Ek Doctor ki Maut* is almost a true story of a researcher doctor of Kolkata who developed a baby in a test tube in the 1970s but committed suicide following unbelief and persecution by the State Government and the medical community. In the film, the doctor, unable to carry on further research in Kolkata, goes over to the USA, which amounts to his ethical death. Among his subsequent films, *Wheel Chair* (1994) and *Aajab Ganyer Aajab Katha* ('A Strange Tale of a Strange Village' 1998) were novel in themes and offbeat in treatment. Despite advanced age, he has remained active. When a new century opened, he made *Shatabdir Kanya*, an omnibus film, based on short stories by five writers of the 20th century, featuring five women, both married and widows, overcoming life's odds and difficult circumstances. The stories are *Jibita-O-Mrita* by Rabindranath Tagore, *Abhagir Swarga* by Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, *Charu* by Gour Kishore Ghosh, *Champia* by Prafulla Roy and one by Dibyendu Palit.

Nabyendu Chatterjee

Nabyendu Chatterjee's *Aaj Kaal Parshur Galpa* (1981) and *Chopper* (1985) were inspired by Communism but were too morbid and stark for common viewers. *Shilpi* ('The Artist', 1993) and *Mansur Mian-r Ghoda* ('The Last Ride', 1999) qualified for the Indian Panorama. Chatterjee's 10th film, *Shilpi* was based on Manik Bandyopadhyaya's story about an artistic weaver who, during the Bengal Famine of 1942-'43, is forced by black marketeers to weave in coarse yarn and starve. A merchant concedes to his request for good yarn but the artist in him weaves his dream *saree* on the empty loom in protest. *Mansur Mian-r Ghoda* is about a horse-cab driver (a vanishing tribe in Kolkata) whose inherited landau and horse no longer attract passengers and sustain his family of four. While planning to sell them and buy a taxi, he is thrilled by a man's proposal to hire the landau for his son's wedding procession. He decorates it but returns home dejected, as the groom refuses to board it and goes to bride's house in a decorated car. That night, he dreams of his parents, of a deceased younger brother and of the horse in the stable. He falls ill; the landau is finally sold to the highest bidder, as life goes out of him.

Utpal Dutt

Utpal Dutt's popularity as an actor in Bengali and Hindi, in both offbeat and mainstream genres, has somewhat clouded his reputation as a maker of offbeat films. A considerable Shakespeare scholar, he was a celebrity on Kolkata's Minerva Theatre before switching over to cinema. Born in Shillong in 1929, Dutt joined Geoffrey Kendall's touring theatre staging Shakespeare's plays (on which Merchant-Ivory made *Shakespearewallah*, 1965); he staged, and performed in, many of them for the Little Theatre Group. After some years with the IPTA, he made his cine-debut as director, *Megh* in 1961. Amidst a hectic acting career in cinema in Kolkata and Mumbai, he directed five more features- *Ghoom Bhangar Gaan* (1965), *Jhor* (1979), *Baisakhi Megh* (1981), *Maa* (1983) and a Hindi film *Inquilab ke Baad* (1984). His best-known *Jhor* ('The Storm', 1979) is about Henry Vivian Derozio, an Eurasian professor in Kolkata's Hindu College (later Presidency College) who led an unsuccessful rationalistic movement, called 'Young Bengal' to demolish Hindu myths and superstitions and along with his students saved a widow from committing *Sati* on her husband's pyre. All his films and plays are imbued with Marxist ideals to which he remained committed till his death in 1993.

Shombhu Mitra

Though, like his wife, Tripti, a celebrity on Kolkata stage, Mitra directed two films, *Jagte Raho/Ek Din Raatre* (Hindi/Bengali, 1956) and *Shubho Bibaha* (1959). Produced by Raj Kapoor and dialogues in Hindi written by K A Abbas and music by Salil Choudhury, *Jagte Raho/Ek Din Raatre* was a hit both on Bengali and Hindi circuits. A thirsty peasant (memorably played by Raj Kapoor) wanders through Kolkata at night and breaks into an apartment block. Chased by residents, he moves from flat to flat and has both comic and tragic experiences. The film ends with an indictment of the middle-class which does not value honesty. In a fantasy sequence, a kind woman (Nargis) offers him water to the tune of a rousing song. It won the main prize in Karlovy Vary Festival in 1957 and remains probably the only offbeat film, produced and enacted by Raj Kapoor.

Others

Other offbeat films by second-generation makers are *Trishagni* ('Sand Storm', 1988) by Nabendu Ghosh, *Dour* (1979) and *Ashwamedher Ghora* (1980) by Shankar Bhattacharya, the second featuring Girish Karnad in a role. *Trishagni* was shown in Indian Panorama. A nearly forgotten offbeat talent is **Barin Saha** whose only feature film, *Tero Nadir Parey* in 1969 was praised in certain festivals abroad. It was about the conflicts and jealousies in an itinerant circus party, performing in a riverine market place, Teropakhia in East Midnapur district of West Bengal. Saha was then a young, Marxist filmbuff; his unsuccessful debut impressed the noted film critic, Georges Sadoul so much that he arranged for him a fellowship abroad. He made no other film and returning to India some years later, engaged in social work till his early death on 28 November 1993.

Some of **Tarun Majumdar**'s later films tended to offbeat, particularly *Shrimaan Prithviraj* (1972), *Phuleswari* and *Thagini* (both in 1974), *Sansar Simantey* (1975), *Ganadevata* (1978), *Dadar Kirti* (1980) and 24 years later, *Alo* (2004). *Sansar Simantey* is a gripping tale (by Premendra Mitra) of prostitutes endearing a city youngman not as a 'customer' but their well-wisher. *Dadar Kirti* with its tale of young innocent love, woven with a number of *Rabindrasangeet* became one of the rave hits of Bengali cinema.

XII. *Samskara* ushers Offbeat in South

“The film [‘Samskara’] is a startling indictment of caste and priesthood—two things that traditional India holds most sacred.”

—Darryl d’ Monte [in The Guardian]

The movie itself had a late start in south India, except in Tamil Nadu. The first offbeat film of the south also came to be made, some 15 years after *Pather Panchali* in 1970. It was a Kannada film, *Samskara* (‘Funeral Rites’, 1970), made by Pattabhirama Reddy who along with his wife, Snehalata was then active in an amateur theatre group, ‘Madras Players’. The first films of Adoor Gopalakrishnan and G Aravindan- *Swayamvaram* (1972) and *Uttarayanam* (1974) respectively- came two and four years after it; offbeat films in Tamil and Telegu came much later.

Madhavas, a Brahmin sub-sect in Karnataka, worship Vishnu, while the *Smarthas* worship Shiva; both avoid pollution through food and touch by low-caste people. A renegade Brahmin, who took meat and liquor, kept a concubine from a low class and defied every caste taboo dies. Villagers consult an ascetic, Praneshacharya, whether he can be cremated and by whom. The concubine gives her ornaments to pay for the last rites. The ascetic finds no answer in scriptures and in a dream, confronts the dead. He meets the concubine in a temple and has sex with her, releasing his pent-up libido. Some drunken youth, decide to cremate the rotting dead body but are frightened by rats, feeding on it. The ascetic sends for the *guru* of the community for his ruling, while he roams aimlessly. Realising that he had lived a hypocritical life, he returns to the village, which has meanwhile been deserted on the outbreak of plague, caused by the rats. The ascetic cremates the corpse’s skeleton himself to expiate his dogmatism.

Kannada films were then being made in Chennai; there was no film industry as such in Karnataka. *Samskara* was not only the first offbeat film but its popularity also hastened the birth of an industry. It made five outstanding Kannadigas, associated with it, famous overnight. Apart from Reddy, they are U R Ananthamurthy, Snehalata Reddy, Girish Karnad and P. Lankesh.

U R Ananthamurthy, who wrote the story, while in Oxford University, at the instance of his teacher, Malcolm Bradbury, emulated the existential literature of Franz Kafka, Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. He was deeply influenced by Ram Manohar Lohia’s anti-caste ideas. “Lohia’s caste analysis had helped me to see how the caste system can trap you and thus limit your awareness of life”, he wrote in a tribute to him after his death. He was in the vanguard of the *Navya* literary movement, which stoked a kind of cultural renaissance and revival of the Kannada theatre in the 1950s and 1960s.

Reddy, educated in Kolkata and USA, produced and directed the film. **Girish Karnad**, a Rhodes Scholar educated in Oxford, scripted and played the ascetic's role. Pattabhi's wife, **Snehalata**, then an accomplished stage actress, played the concubine and versatile **P Lankesh**- actor, film director, poet, playwright and a major novelist- played the renegade Brahmin.

Pattabhirama Reddy

Pattabhirama Reddy was born in 1919 at Nellore in a wealthy agricultural family, to parents who inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, took part in Non-Cooperation Movement. He liked Bengali literature and cinema, while studying in Viswa Bharati, Santiniketan from 1937 to 1939 and thereafter, in Calcutta University for the Master's degree in English literature. Poverty, noise, squalor and pre-War misery of people in Kolkata shocked him so much that he left the city, halfway through his study and joined his family's business of mica export at Gudur. In 1940, he went to study Mathematics in Columbia University and completing it, took a film course in the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Returning home in 1943, he married Snehlata Reddy in 1947 and together launched an English weekly, *Focus* and a children's monthly, *Magic Garden*. He also dabbled in poetry and wrote 12 lyrics, compiled as *Ragala Dozen* ('A Dozen Melodies') on his Kolkata experiences. He was under the influence of Ram Manohar Lohia, the socialist leader whose ideas helped in the blossoming of a socio-cultural renaissance in Karnataka.

While working as an assistant to a producer and a script-writer, he chanced upon U R Anantamurthy's story. Karnad, who had also read the story in manuscript, while working for the Oxford University Press in Chennai, wrote a shooting script. Anantamurthy returned to Bangalore to have a film on the story directed by Pattabhi; Karnad and his co-actors had already shaven heads and kept tufts to act in the film. The only professional with them was an Australian cameraman, Tom Cowan who happened to be in Bangalore then, shot it in the hills near Mysore. It came at a time when a fusion of the literary and dramatic movements was taking place under the impact of the *Navya* Movement. *Samskara* turned out to be an indictment of caste and Brahminism and although banned for some time, it became a path-breaking offbeat film and got, besides the President's Gold Medal, the 'Bronze Leopard' at Locarno.

Reddy's next film after *Samskara* was *Chandamarutha* ('Wild Wind', 1977) illustrated how the inner force of an individual can help him triumph over authoritarianism. His wife, Snehalata and daughter, Nandana played two important roles. He made his third feature in Hindi, *Sringaramas*, based on his own story in 1982, featuring only a man and a woman engaged in romantic and sexual escapades. After a decade, he returned to produce and direct his third film, *Devara Kadu* in 1993, adjudged the 'best film on environment'. A poor family migrates from a denuded forest and settles on an arid government land. A drought forces it to migrate again to a city, where the mother becomes a maidservant and the son a rag-picker and later, a cycle-rickshaw puller. They save every *paisa* and return to their forestland. The mother dies of exhaustion, and cremating her, the son goes to the arid land where he cannot locate his plot. He settles

on another plot and plants trees until the area becomes a lush forest. He dies eventually, bequeathing the forest to a Swamy who finds the mother of his seeking in Mother Earth. Mr. Reddy told this writer in his Bangalore home on 17 September 1994:

“*Devava Kadu* was inspired by a two-page story in the *Reader's Digest* about an Algerian soldier's return home to find the forests felled during a war. Environmental themes attract me, as I see dense forests on the Western Ghat ranges being denuded by contractors and poachers. The true precursor of Kannada offbeat cinema is **not** me but Puttana Kanagal, whose *Belli Moda* (1967) was the first truly offbeat film in Kannada in spite of box-office ingredients. I took to filmmaking to vent my poetic urges, as I think, cinema can be closest to poetry.”

Girish Karnad

Girish Karnad was born in 1938 at Matheran in Maharashtra. Graduating from Karnataka University, he went over to Oxford on a Rhodes scholarship to study philosophy, politics and economics. Returning home in 1963, he became Assistant Manager of the Oxford University Press at Chennai. Initially, he was drawn to the stage and before co-directing with B.V. Karanth, *Vamsa Vriksha*, wrote and staged very original and stirring plays in Kannada, like *Yayati* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1964) and *Hayavadana* (1971). His achievement in the theatre is as much as, if not more than, cinema. His own film debut, *Vamsa Vriksha* came a year after *Samskara* in 1971. Five more of his films upto his latest, *Cheluvi* (1992) contributed to Kannada offbeat genre. He also acted in some 40 films in several languages.

Girish Karnad directed seven films- four in Kannada and three in Hindi. His debut in Kannada was *Vamsa Vriksha* ('Family Tree' which he co-directed with B V Karanth) in 1971; followed *Kaadu* ('The Forest', 1973), *Tabbaliyu Neenade Magane* ('The Hour of the Gods', the Kannada version of Hindi *Godhuli*, both in 1977), *Ondanondu Kaladalli* ('Once upon a Time', 1978) and *Kanooru Heggadithi* ('The Mistress of the House of Kanooru', 2000) and in Hindi *Godhuli*, *Utsav* ('The Festival', 1983) and *Cheluvi* ('The Tree in Blossom', 1992).

Vamsa Vriksha ('Family Tree') is about a wealthy, pious scholar who is also proud of his lineage. After his son's death by drowning, he disowns his widow for falling in love with, and marrying, an English teacher. She remains childless in her second marriage; her only son by the first marriage, whom the scholar had brought up, refuses to accept her as mother who now teaches him. Ill health leads her to the verge of death when the old scholar, her father-in-law, comes to see her, shorn of wealth and ego. He had meanwhile discovered his illegitimate birth.

Kaadu turned out to be a significant offbeat film with Govind Nihalani wielding the camera and B V Karanth composing the music. Based on a folk play by Srikrishna Alanahalli, it was about rivalry between two villages, as seen by a ten-year old boy who comes to live in a remote village in the 1940s with a childless aunt and uncle. While a village *Panchayet* sits in judgement over an extramarital affair between a man of its

village and a woman of another, her villagers storm the session and in the meleé, blood flows. The aunt of the boy is raped and killed. Her husband attacks the intruders with companions until the police arrive and arrest the survivors in a gory fight. The violent film ends poetically, as the boy goes into a forest in search of a killer bird which attracts its victims by calling their names. Tom Milne praised it in *Sight & Sound* for its 'fascinating wealth of details', giving it 'a novelistic density'.

Karnad was influenced by Akira Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai* (1954), while making his 1978 film, *Ondanondu Kaladalli*. Set in the 13th century milieu of a small kingdom between Malnad jungles and Deccan plains, it depicted a lawless society in which mercenary warriors fought out the rights over land. It is a 'finely crafted' action film, almost a swashbuckler; Karnad himself called it 'a tribute to Kurosawa'. It is said to be the first film, devoted to the Indian martial art.

Kanooru Heggadithi, based on a classic novel by K V Puttapa, is about a young woman from a poor family, who gets married to a rich and powerful man whose two previous wives had died, giving birth to three sons. The unexpected marriage causes upheaval in his complex relationships with his kith and kin and a bitter feud ensues between him and his nephew. After his death, she develops a relationship with an aide of her husband and the family goes downhill until the wife of a son of a previous wife exerts to save it.

Karnad is one of the finest film scriptwriters in India. Because of mythic content, his films are deeply disturbing. He co-scripted three Shyam Benegal films- *Bhumika* with Satyadev Dubey, *Kondura* with Arudra and Benegal and *Kalyug* with Dubey.

Other Offbeat Films in Kannada

H L N Simha's *Samsara Nauka* ('The Boat of Life', 1936) was a kind of precursor of Kannada offbeat cinema but truer antetypes were S R Puttana Kanagal's *Bellimoda* ('Silvery Clouds', 1968) and *Sharapanjara* ('The Cage', 1971), dealing with contemporary themes. An offbeat urge was noticed in a short film, *Bliss* by N Lakshminarayan in 1961 and in his longer *Nandi* in 1964 but none of these was as truly offbeat as Pattabhirama Reddy's debut, *Samskara*.

B V Karanth

B V Karanth (1929-2002) passed out from the National School of Drama in Delhi and became its Director in 1978. His debut in film direction was *Chomana Dudi* ('Choma's Drum') in 1975, which got the National Award for best film, that year. Based on a novel by Shivrama Karanth, it is about an old man, Choma who cannot repay a landlord's debt, as being untouchable, he is forbidden to till the land, even though he has two buffaloes. Poverty ruins his family; two sons die and a third converts to Christianity. The landlord's secretary seduces his daughter who hoping to settle the loan, submits to his lust. Distraught, Choma (played memorably by Vasudev Rao) beats his little drum at night, along with his daughter. Discovering her relation with the landlord, Choma goes into

a forest, breaks his plough, sets two buffaloes free and dies, while beating the drum in frenzy. He co-scripted and directed the music of many of Girish Kasaravalli's films as well as Mrinal Sen's *Parashuram* (1979) and *Ek Din Pratidin* (1980). He won national awards for music direction in 1977 (*Ghatashraddha*) and in 1978.

M S Sathyu

M S Sathyu was born at Mysore in 1930 in an orthodox Brahmin family, which wanted him to be a scientist, or an engineer but taking interest in the stage, he joined the IPTA in Mumbai as a designer. He directed and produced a Hindi adaptation of Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and some other plays. In 1973, he made his first film in Urdu, *Garm Hawa* ('Hot Winds'), for which he is best known. Sathyu made films in Hindi too, besides four features in Kannada, namely *Kanneshwara Rama* ('The Legendary Outlaw', 1977), *Chithegu Cherithe* ('The Restless Corpse', 1978), *Bara* ('The Famine', 1981) and *Galige* (1995). All these qualified for the Indian Panorama. He made Hindi versions of the first and third also; *Bara* became *Dushkal* in Hindi in 1982 but none surpassed *Garm Hawa* (discussed in Urdu section in Chapter XI). He also made, in 1982, *Kahan Kahan Se Guzar Gaya* in Hindi with aid from West Bengal Government.

Kanneshwara Rama is about a simple farmer whom circumstances make an idealistic outlaw, like Robin Hood. He throws a challenge to the British in the 1920s in the dense forests and hills of Malnad. *Chithegu Chinte* is a satire set in an imaginary island; it turned out to be a critique of political bosses, actor-leaders and the formula films of Mumbai and Chennai. The complex story is laced with light-hearted dialogue and funny situations. *Bara* on a story by U R Anantamurthy deals with a conflict between bureaucrats and politicians in distributing food to the famished people in the chronically drought-hit Bidar area, leading to a communal riot which forces the Home Minister to resign. M S Sathyu could never condescend to make a commercial film. Mystic and a philosopher in outlook, Sathyu is of pure offbeat streak; he makes films, driven by conscience and conviction to champion public causes.

Girish Kasaravalli

Girish Kasaravalli was born in 1949 as K G Girish (Karanth) in Kasaravalli village in 1949 in Shimoga district. While studying Pharmacology at Hyderabad in 1972, he saw some films of Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen and was so inspired that he gave up the search for a herbal malaria cure and joined the FTII, Pune to get a diploma in direction. *Avashesh* ('The Remnant'), a short by him, was adjudged the Best Student Film of 1975 in the FTII and got a national award as the Best Experimental Short Film of that year. The Institute jury did not approve his diploma script and as he refused to give another, he did not get his diploma from the FTII. Ironically, on this script, he made his first and most well-known film, *Ghatashraddha* (1977); apart from winning the President's 'Golden Lotus', it got two special awards in Manheim Festival in 1978.

Ghatashraddha ('The Ritual'), also based on a story by U R Ananthamurthy, set in the 1920s, is about a child widow who protects a boy pupil of his father's school from bullying by seniors; the story is seen through his eyes. While she lives with her father- a scholar running a scripture school- a school teacher seduces and impregnates her. Wanting to abort the foetus, she meets the school teacher in a forest. Other pupils eavesdrop and tell a shrewish widow who whispers it to all in the village. She attempts suicide by thrusting her hand in a snake-hole but the boy intervenes. The teacher takes her to a quack woman for abortion but during the crude act, he runs away. She and the boy flee and hide in a forest but the villagers find them and force the boy to leave her. She is rendered an outcaste- her head shaven off, as Brahmin widows are made to do. The father performs *ghata shraddha* by breaking an earthen pot (a symbol of fertility) and offers his 16-year daughter to a 50-year old widower.

Akramana ('The Siege', 1979) is a love story in lighter vein. A post-graduate student woos an older woman, living with a small boy after her husband deserts her. When the affair deepens, the student offers to marry her but she chooses to return to her husband who eventually comes back. Jilted, he becomes a college teacher where he falls for a young student. As he offers to marry her, she cools off, as she and her widowed mother cannot free themselves from the control of brothers-in-law. His amour again ends in disillusion.

A year later followed his *Mooru Darigalu* ('The Three Ways', 1980), based on a Kannada novel about women's exploitation. An adolescent girl becomes the subject of a gossip about her being involved with a photographer. To nip it in the bud, her orthodox father arranges a marriage with an idealistic school teacher but nobody clears her of unfounded suspicions. She commits suicide in protest against such male chauvinism.

Tabarane Katha ('Tale of Tabarane', 1987) is a pitiless exposure of corruption, negligence and unconcern in government offices. Comparable to De Sica's *Umberto-D*, it is a heart-rending tale of an old pensioner's persecution for being frank and truthful. It became a sensation, when featured in Indian Panorama in 1988. Two more of his Kannada features also made it to the Indian Panorama- *Mane* (1990) and *Kraurya* (1996) and almost every new film by this talented director finds a place in it and sent to one or more foreign festivals.

Kasaravalli was influenced deeply by Satyajit Ray's early films; critics find similarities of some of his films with Ray's. He works out his scripts to minute detail and dislikes improvisation. He also writes profusely on cinema in Kannada newspapers and periodicals. In his films, the protagonist is often a woman. He told this writer in his house of novel architecture in the outskirt of Bangalore on 18 September 1994:

"In the early 1970s, Karnataka was passing through a cultural ferment. In literature, V K Gokak started the *Navya* movement in poetry. Novels of Albert Camus and Franz Kafka in translation influenced writers. Kannada theatre got a fillip after B V Karanth's return from National School of Drama in Delhi; in 1969 he produced three powerful plays

including one Sophocles's *King Oedipus*. A new ethos invaded the cinema and prompted me to make films. Writings of KV Subanna made a new generation take cinema seriously."

G V Iyer

G V Iyer, born in the 1930s, is known for his films in Sanskrit. He also made some 70 films in Kannada. In 1970, when he was in the thick of mainstream cinema, it dawned on him that he had made and lost fortunes in making them but was nowhere near immortality. When Pattabhi Rama Reddy's *Sanskara* (1970) was first shown in a Chennai Art Theatre, G V suddenly announced that he would also make a progressive film. Next year, he backed Girish Karnad and B V Karanth to make *Vamsha Vriksha* (1971). He did not return to make mainstream Kannada films any more. Followed his own film, *Sankalpa* in 1973, dealing with a mystic *Sannyasi* (Hindu monk), which won the State gold medal. His real break in offbeat cinema came with *Hamsa Geethe*. In *Vamsha Vriksha* and *Sankalpa*, he consciously tried to emulate Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen whose films he greatly admired.

He made *Kudre Motte* in, what he claims as, Ray's style, heavily laden with symbolism. As no distributor took it, he realized that he must pursue his own style, not others', howsoever great. Having a devotional mind, he planned a series of biographical films on the saint philosophers of the South- Adi Shankaracharya (who was born in Kerala), Madhwacharya and Ramanujacharya- in Sanskrit, Kannada and Tamil respectively.

The first outcome of this introspection was *Madhwacharya* in 1986 in Kannada on the great exponent of *Dvaitabad* (Philosophy of Duality) of the 13th century. Based on a biography by Narayanacharya, a younger saint, the film traced the sage's eventful life, from his birth in an *Advaitin* family to his enunciation of *Dvaitabad* in the face of Adi Shankara's *Advaitabad* (Monism).

He made two other biographical films- on Adi Shankaracharya and Ramanujacharya- the first in Sanskrit (also India's first Sanskrit feature film), the second in Tamil. He defended making a film in Sanskrit, as it is 'the origin of all *prakriti* (Nature)'. He learnt it only during its filming and resolved, "to remind every Indian to rekindle his inner voice" through the film. However, his *magnum opus* came in 1992 in the filmic rendering of *Srimad Bhagvadgita*, apparently an intractable material for cinema, for its profound philosophical content. He read about 300 interpretations in eight years and got seven Sanskrit scholars to guide him. The second half of the film was shot in the Himalayas with much esoteric symbolism of the *yoga*, like the *Chakras* and invested the *Viswaroopa Darshan* sequence with modern cosmology. While *Adi Shankaracharya* (1987) got the President's award as the first Sanskrit film, *Bhagavad Gita* was adjudged the best film of 1992 and was dubbed in Tamil, Telugu and Hindi. It took two years to make and more than one-third of it was shot above 14,000 feet in the Himalayas.

Shankar Nag

Shankar Nag (1954-'92) was a noted actor in Kannada films and a partner producer of *Sanket* before making his first film, *Minchina Oato*, in 1980, about three petty thieves. In the same year came *Janma Janmada Anubandha*, followed by *Geetha* (1981) and *Laalach* (1983). *Accident* (1984) was featured in Indian Panorama in January 1986 and got a national award for its anti-prohibition message. Nag who later made an excellent serial on R K Narayana's *Swami* and *Malgudi Days* on Doordarshan, died in one such accident. He was lured to cinema by his elder brother, Anant Nag, a cine actor, besides being active in Kannada, Gujarati, Marathi, Hindi and English theatres in Mumbai and assisting Sai Paranjpye in her early films. Girish Karnad gave him a role in his *Ondanondu Koladalli*, for which he received the 'Best Actor' award in 1979 IFFI. He also acted in Karnad's *Utsav* (1983) and in about 40 other feature films.

T S Nagabharana

T S Nagabharana, born in 1953 in Bangalore, also came from the Kannada stage, where he was apprentice to a noted playwright, Adya Rangacharya and associated with B V Karanth's amateur group, *Benaka*; he also directed several short plays. He also worked, in various capacities, for numerous plays, television serials and advertisement films. His interest in cinema grew, while assisting Karanth in *Chomana Dudi* and Girish Karnad in his first four films. His debut, *Grahana* ('The Eclipse') is based on a story by Kodalli Shivaram about the ills of the caste system. It received two President's awards in 1978 as well as a special award at Manheim Festival. His next three films- *Anveshane* ('The Search', 1980), *Kappu Moda Belli Anchu* ('Dark Clouds, Silver Lining', 1981) and *Banker Margayya* ('Banker Margayya', 1983) have offbeat themes. *Anveshane* is about the misery of the unemployed. *Banker Margayya*, based on R K Narayana's novel, *The Financial Expert* is also against casteism; it got the national award for best Kannada film of 1983. The trend continued in *Asphota* ('The Explosion', 1988), *Santha Shishunala Shareefa* (1990) and *Mysore Mallige* (1991); the last is based on the work of a renowned poet and was awarded. His 1993 film, *Chinnare Mutha* is about children; how being inspired and ably guided, they can do the impossible, as illustrated by an energetic poor boy, Mutha. *Anveshane* (1980), *Mysoora Mallige* (1991), *Chinnari Mutha* (1993) and *Nagamandala* (1997) qualified for the Indian Panorama.

His 2001 film, *Neela* which also qualified for the Panorama, is about an ordinary tribal girl who earns her living by singing folk songs in praise of the tribal chief and his dynasty. She passes through various vicissitudes, as she grows up but becomes a great singer. She attains stardom but is suddenly afflicted with throat cancer. Hospitalised, she realises that she cannot sing again. Inspired by another cancer patient who remains cheerful, she resolves to regain her voice. She goes in search of an uncle who advised her to sing about worthy people. Through a mystical experience, she regains strength to sing and joining with her people, reveals through a song that the tribal chief is not a legal heir of the previous chieftain. While the people applaud, the chief drenches her family in a pool of blood.

His 2002 feature, *Singarava* (2002), shown in the Indian Panorama, is about the daughter of one of three wives of a greedy and corrupt village head. To acquire wealth, he makes her marry the corpse of his sister's son. He does more heinous acts to her through a tortuous story, ending in her pregnancy. She is transformed from a conventional wife to a rebel who dares fulfil her sexual desires.

N Lakshminarayanan

N Lakshminarayanan's first experimental film, *Bliss* (1961) was awarded at San Francisco Festival for its 'artistic expression'. He went on making offbeat films, like *Nandi* (1964), *Uyyale* (1969), *Mukti* (1970) and *Abachurina Post Office* in 1973. His 1978 *Mayyi* was India's entry in the Third World Film Festival in Paris in 1982. His fame rests on films, like *Bettada Hoovu* ('A Hill Flower', 1985) which was featured in Hyderabad *Filmotsava* of 1986. A poor woodcutter's son wants to buy a popular edition of the *Ramayana* for ten rupees; to earn this, he sells flowers to tourists. A foreign woman, who has come to India to paint strange flowers, looks for an orchid to draw, for which she would pay five rupees. He gets her the orchid from a forest and gets the money but as he rushes to buy the *Ramayana*, he sees an old man shivering under a tattered blanket. He thinks of his family's need for a blanket and instead of the *Ramayana*, buys a blanket under which that night, they all sleep well, implying that material needs are more urgent than spiritual.

Others

Among younger filmmakers, **V Jagannath** (born 1956) came to be known outside Karnataka through his *Kadige Hodavaru* ('People who went to forest!', 1979), shown in Indian Panorama at Bangalore *Filmotsava* in January 1980. It is a story of caste jealousy and marital suspicion in a Karnataka village, ending in a terrible tragedy. Jagannath made another feature, *Kanchana Mruga* ('The Golden Deer') in 1981, which made no great mark.

As in other Indian cinemas, Kannada mainstream films are stifling the offbeat, illustrated by the fate of a debut by FTII-passed **Umesh Kulkarni**, *Shankanada*. Unable to secure a release in the normal theatre-chains, he took it to a tent cinema in a village, where it was shot. He made another offbeat, *Utthara Boopa*, which had difficulty with the censors; it also did not have commercial release, like his debut. A Kannada film actor who suddenly emerged as an offbeat filmmaker is **B Sunder Krishna Urs** with *Sangya Balya* in 1992; it featured in the Indian Panorama of 1993. Based on a Karnataka folk tale, it is about two close friends- one rich and the other poor. The rich friend sees a woman in a village fair and plots with the poor friend to wean her away from her trader husband. This brings the poor friend and the woman together and they fall in love. The trader comes to know of his wife's affair and kills her paramour with the help of the rich friend.

The prolific Telugu mainstream director, **Singeetham Srinivasa Rao** made two films in Kannada, tending to offbeat- *Halu Jenu* and *Chelsuva Modagalu*, both in 1982.

A third, *Pushpaka Vimanam* (1988), offbeat for its novelty, featured in Indian Panorama; it had no dialogue and but for the background music, it is like a silent film. It did not have any viewer outside Karnataka but featured in Moscow Festival. A cameraman, **B C Gowrishankar**'s second feature, *Elusuthina Kote* was inspired by Dostoevsky's *Crime & Punishment* but like his debut, *Kendada Male* it was full of entertaining ingredients. Other Kannada films to feature in the Indian Panorama are *Kokila* (1977) by **Balu Mahendra**, *Kakankote* (1977) by **C R Simha**, *Kaadu Kudre* (1978) by **Chandrasekhar Kambar**, *Avasthe* (1987) by Krishna Masadi, *Kanakambara* (1977) by **S. Kshirsagar**, *Kubi Mattu Iyala* (1989) by **Sadanand Suvarna**, *Savithri* (1979) by **T S Ranga** and *Rishyashringa* (1977) by **V R K Prasad**.

P Sheshadri's *Atithi* ('The Guest', 2001), shown in next year's Indian Panorama, is about terrorist strikes in Karnataka. They blow up a bridge by a remote device and flee to the woods. They abduct a surgeon's wife and dictate her husband to operate on one of them to get her back. He does and keeps the injured terrorist in his home; the wife is set free. They plan another blast but put it off, taking pity on the surgeon's daughter to take part in a ceremony.

XIII. Adoor and Aravindan lead in Kerala

“A film should not leave you cold. It should act upon you. It should make you aware, respond and react. A true work of art is one that questions the status quo.”
—Adoor Gopalakrishnan

The offbeat wave that lapped Hindi and Bengali cinema in the 1970s became a contagion, affecting aspirants in other regions too. Screenings of European and Japanese offbeat classics in fast-breeding film societies and festivals whetted their imagination and desire. The FFC's liberal grant of loans eased the problem of finding producers, because few could expect box-office success of such films. Of the four major south Indian cinemas, Malayalam became a fertile field for the blossoming of the offbeat genre, in fact, much more than Bengali where it originated. It grew to be the most prolific and advanced; offbeat Malayalam films have been, almost every year, the majority in the Indian Panorama section of IFFIs and *Filmotsavas*. While Hindi and almost every other regional cinema began with mythologicals, Malayalam cinema, right from its beginning, showed an interest in social issues and therefore, embraced realism much earlier.

The most significant contribution to the genre, both in number and quality, has been made by both mainstream and offbeat directors, like Ramu Kariat, P Bhaskaran, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, G Aravindan, Shaji N Karun, T V Chandran, K S Sethumadhavan and M T Vasudevan Nair, to name the most well-known. Lesser-known outside Kerala are P N Menon, K.R.Mohanan, P A Backer, K R Pavithran, K G George, Sibi Malayil, A Vincent, Pratap Pothan, John Abraham, P Padmarajan, B G Bharathan, G S Panicker, Padmakumar, Fazil, I V Sasi, P. Sreekumar, P M Abdul Azeez, T Hariharan, Harikumar, Lenin Rajendran, C Radhakrishnan, C P Padmakumar, T K Prakash, M P Sukumaran Nair, John C Shankaramangalam, James Joseph, Joseph Madapally, P T Kunhimohammad and in the third generation, Jayaraj, R Shyama Prasad, Sivan, Sivaprasad, V R Gopinath, Satish Menon and Asok R Nath.

The films of late G Aravindan and Adoor are invited to many foreign festivals, building up their international renown. Retrospective of their films are also held, from time to time, in India and abroad. Aravindan died, unexpectedly, in 1991 but the interest in his nine feature films has remained undiminished. Adoor Gopalakrishnan is in the acme of his career and his latest, *Nizhalkkuthu* ('Shadow Kill', 2002) was acclaimed and awarded, like most of his previous films.

The 'offbeat wave' as well as a surge in popular Malayalam cinema came about the same time, from the mid-1970s, following huge repatriation and investments in film industry by cashewnut exporters and expatriate Keralites in Gulf countries. It was also

due to high literacy, as Adoor told this writer on 30 January 2001 in his Thiruvananthapuram home:

“If the quality of Malayalam films is higher than other regional cinemas, it is due to high literacy in Kerala (93%) and the spread of film societies (they may not be as active as in the past but still they do exert a certain degree of influence on quality filmmaking.”

The ‘wave’ generated popular interest in offbeat cinema and spawned film societies; the tiny coastal State has over 60 of them. Soorya Film Society in Thiruvananthapuram is said to be the most active in India. Kerala Film Chamber of Commerce at Cochin, the Malayalam Film Producers’ Association and the *Chalachitra Parishad*, both functioning from Chennai, also gave a fillip to the ‘wave’. Four modern studios- *Udaya* in Aleppey, *Vijaya* in Kunchako, *Navodaya*, *Merryland* and *Chitranjali* (all capital Thiruvananthapuram, the last owned by the Kerala State Film Development Corporation) are active throughout the year. The film co-operatives that came into being after the success of *Chitralekha*, co-founded by Adoor Gopalakrishnan and later of the *Odessa*, founded by late John Abraham, gave loans to, and helped in other ways, young aspirants. Thiruvananthapuram has become a venue for holding the IFFIs since 1988 when it hosted a *Filmotsava*, coinciding with the Golden Jubilee of Malayalam cinema. All these combined to make Kerala capital a major film city after Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai.

Malayalam cinema’s umbilical link with literature enriched its offbeat genre. The stories came from both well-known and lesser known writers and the emphasis on a good story has stayed with for both genres. Although early Malayalam films were influenced by Tamil cinema, offbeat filmmakers from Adoor onward were inspired by Bengali stalwarts- Ray, Sen and Ghatak. The low-budget ethos made possible more offbeat films than commercial. Frugal directors went to Kerala countryside for outdoor shooting amid lush flora and halcyon backwaters. Keralites crave songs in films, particularly those of poets, like Vayalar Rama Varma, P Bhaskaran, O N V Kurup and Y A Kecheri. Offbeat films cut down songs and dances and popularised a new kind of cinema.

Adoor Gopalakrishnan

Born in Adoor town in a family, excelling in *Kathakali* on 3rd July 1941, he graduated from Madurai in 1961. He was in Kerala government service for a while but his passion for theatre, and later for cinema, made him resign and proceed to Pune to take up the director’s course in the FTII. Passing out in 1965, he and some friends launched India’s first film production cooperative, *Chitralekha* of which he was the kingpin till he quit it in 1980. His first two films were produced under its banner.

His debut feature, *Swayamvaram* (‘Self-Choice’, 1972) is about two young lovers who elope to marry but find their dream shattered on the rock of reality. His second, *Kodiyettam* (*The Ascent*, 1977) is about a country lad, who while roaming aimless and carefree, marries a young girl. She eventually leaves him, as he does not properly take care of her. He takes to liquor, works with a truck driver but eventually realising that he

has ill-treated his wife, woos her back. The film used only natural sounds of the countryside and the drumbeats of *Kathakali* on the sound track. Adoor's subtle humour, fine observation, insights into characters, drawn sometimes from his own experience, raised it far above the humdrum Malayalam films. It was also autobiographical; Adoor said, "It is my story; it is my experience. Each and every frame is from my heart".

His foreign recognition came with his third feature, *Elippathayam* ('The Rat Trap') in 1981. Soon after winning the President's award for best Malayalam film, it featured in 1982 London Film Festival in which the British Film Institute (BFI) gave it the prestigious Sutherland Trophy. It is a deeply perceptive study of feudal decay, comparable to Ray's *Jalsaghar* and Sen's *Baishe Shrawan*. A middle-aged landlord, living parasitically on three unmarried sisters, is unable to face the change in the society; he cannot even take the simplest decision, like crossing a pool of water. Caught between a decadent past and a demanding present, he withdraws like a rat into a hole and lapses into paranoia. He dies pathetically, leaving the family distraught; neighbours cremate him as they drown rats, trapped in a cage.

His next feature, *Mukhamukham* ('Face to Face', 1984) came three years later and went even further in probing the decadence of the human mind. Set in the backdrop of the communist movement of Kerala from the early 1940s to the late 1960s, it became a clinical study of a mind, degenerating under stress. The critics, however, took it as an exposure of the vacuity of communism (which Adoor denied), hastening its collapse in the former Soviet Union in 1992. 'Strangers in the night' beat up a firebrand Marxist revolutionary. A farmer's daughter tends him and earns his love. He goes into hiding to evade the police who suspect his involvement in the murder of a factory-owner. His absence makes him a legend and an inspiring icon. After 10 years, he returns home quietly and falls asleep. Recovering from somnolence after some days, he takes to alcohol. His friends and admirers pull him in different directions, as the Communist Party splits and a new party is born, the CPI-M. His body is found one day, beaten to death under mysterious circumstances. The dead revolutionary rouses people and rival factions parade the streets at the same time, claiming him as their hero. His inglorious death raises the doubt, whether he betrayed the Revolution, or the Revolution betrayed him.

His next film, *Anantaraman* ('Monologue', 1987) dealt with an introverted young man who follows a girl but being too shy, cannot woo her. It swings between reality and illusion and its highly introspective narrative makes it almost a personal cinema. *Mathilukal* ('The Walls', 1989) was produced for Doordarshan and scripted by him, based on prison diaries of a noted Malayalam writer, Basheer who fell in love with a woman prisoner in the next cell. Separated by a high wall, they devise ingenious methods of communicating. The film was shot in confined space, which made it claustrophobic, enhancing emotional appeal.

Vidheyan ('The Servile', 1993), based on a popular novel by Paul Zacharia, is a deeply moving study of servility of a migrant labour, Tommi to a degenerate, whimsical and unscrupulous landlord, Bhaskara Patelar. He settles with his wife in a jungle, straying unwittingly into the landlord's area, which infuriates him. Patelar terrorises the labour into total submission and rapes his wife. Unable to protest, he becomes an accomplice in his

nefarious acts, like eliminating his own nagging wife, kill by dynamite shoals of fish in a holy pond (both unsuccessfully) and other bids of oppression. Patelar succeeds in strangling his wife to death but his attempt to pass it off as a suicide fails. He goes underground where nemesis overtakes him. Woe-struck Tommy takes away the gun from his dead master and throws it in a waterfall.

Utterly different in theme and treatment is *Kathapurushan* ('Man of the Story', 1996), which besides winning the President's gold Medal for 'Best Feature' also got several awards in festivals abroad. It was set in the mid-1930s, when Kerala's feudal society was giving way to an emerging egalitarian ethos, bred by communism in early 1980s. Given up by his separated father, a boy is brought up by his ailing mother, lively grandmother, a faithful estate manager and a maidservant's daughter. Believing that a Revolution is the panacea for all social ills, he joins an extremist (Maoist) group. Eventually, the police arrest him from his printing press; after a trial, the court acquits and lets him off. He is disillusioned of Communism and the Establishment, looks for the maidservant's daughter and marrying her, settles down in his ancestral home to write his experiences.

His 2002 film, *Nizhalkkuthu* ('Shadow Kill') is about an aged and ailing jail hangman, living after retirement in a south Kerala village, then in the princely State of Travancore, in 1940s. Memories of men, he has hanged trouble him. Villagers keep away from him but believe in his 'divine' powers, like curing ailments with the ash of a burnt execution rope. The king seeks him for hanging a convict; reluctantly, he goes to the jail a day before the hanging, where to boost morale he boozes in the night. To ward off sleep, he listens to tales of jail guards; one of these engrosses him. A teen-aged girl, whose brutal rape and murder figure in the tale, is fused in his somnolent mind with his own young daughter. The tale is a replay of the hanging of an innocent boy by the hangman, whose memory had been haunting him for life. Adoor got the cue of the story from a newspaper report of a similar hangman and built up his story around him.

Adoor takes two to three years to make a film and personally checks every frame. All his films have been shown abroad and acclaimed. His book in Malayalam, *The World of Cinema* received the national award in 1983; the year also brought him award of *Padmashri*. He says, the aim in his films is to "study the human mind in its complexity". He admits an eclectic influence- of literature, painting, music, theatre and of course, cinema. "Among the Indian filmmakers, I admire Ray and Ghatak the most. Outside the film world, one person who has influenced me tremendously is Mahatma Gandhi." The ten 'most significant' Malayalam films, according to him, are *Newspaper Boy*, *Chemmeen*, *Neelakkuyil*, *Amma Ariyan*, *Thampi*, *Aparahnam*, *Lekhayude Maranam Oru Flashback*, *Innale*, *Thaniavarthanam* and *Piravi*.

G Aravindan

Govindan Aravindan (1935-1992) made an altogether different corpus of films, uninfluenced by any Western style. Born at Kottayam to Govindan Nair, a noted

Malayalam writer, Aravindan graduated in biology from Thiruvananthapuram and for years drew a popular cartoon serial, 'Little Men, Big World' for *Mathrubhoomi*. He studied Hindustani music and formed a theatre group, *Thiravarung* to promote folk and classical plays. He joined the Kerala Rubber Board and eventually became a Manager and held the post, even when making films, upto his sudden death in 1992. Aravindan was wholly self-taught and his style is rather akin to that of Japanese masters, like Mizoguchi and Ozu- rambling and lyrical; Ritwik Ghatak is somewhat his antetype. His unwavering admirer, Ravindran Nair, an industrialist, produced nearly all his films. He made nine features in 18 years- *Uttarayanam*, *Kanchan Sita*, *Thampu*, *Kummatty*, *Esthappan*, *Pokkuveyil*, *Chidambaram*, *Oridathu* and *Vasthuhara*.

A sage-like, portly man in flowing beard, Aravindan's was a ubiquitous presence in IFFIs and *Filmotsavas*. An early influence was Kurosawa's *Rashoman*, which he saw several times. Wide travels in Kerala gave him a deep understanding of the people and their way of life. Aravindan is often described as a 'purist' in cinema for his developed film sense, fluidity of style and lyricism. Like Satyajit Ray, he has a contemplative style; his films are utterly relaxed and sometimes, even rambling (*Kummatty* and *Oridathu*). His kind of cinema is 'personal' with a loving concern for people and their problems but gave poor box-office returns; only *Chidambaram* grossed over 20 lakh rupees. Unlike Ray but like Sen in this respect, Aravindan constantly improvised during shooting.

Chidambaram (1985) brings out many of his familiar traits. The manager of a State agricultural farm takes fancy to a young wife (Smita Patil) of a farm hand. Coming from Chidambaram, an arid coastal area of Tamilnadu, she amazes at the lush green flora of Kerala. The manager seduces, and has sex with, her during night duties of her husband. One night, the farmhand sees him sneaking out through backdoor. Shocked and unable to protest, he hangs himself to death in a cowshed. Fearing police, the manager runs madly, "as if pursued by the devil within" and collapses. He turns alcoholic, works in a printing press listlessly, haunted by guilt and hallucination of the farm hand, hanging from the ceiling. Doctors cannot cure him. He wanders until he arrives at the Nataraj temple at Chidambaram on Tamil Nadu coast, where Lord Shiva is believed to have begun his *Tandava* dance with his consort, Sati's dead body on his shoulder. Coming out of it, as he wears his shoes in the precincts, he finds that the shoe-keeper with a deep scar on her face is none other than the farm hand's wife. She has also come to the temple to expiate her sin.

Kummatty is a *tour de force* about an imaginary bogeyman, featuring in children's folklore in north Kerala, who entertains children with magic, songs and dances. *Pokkuveyil*, meaning 'twilight', was about a young man, his poetic introspection, love and separation from a girl friend, brief contact with a political extremist and his lapse into a 'twilight of mind'. *Oridathu* ('And there was a village', 1986) deals with resistance and reactions of villagers to the coming of electricity.

Other Directors

Although Adoor and Aravindan led the 'wave' in Malayalam cinema from the early 1970s, some films have been realistic before their's, particularly early films of Ramu Kariat and P Bhaskaran. They continued making realistic films, contributing to the 'wave' rising with the films of Adoor, Aravindan and a host of youngsters.

Ramu Kariat

Ramu Kariat (1927-1979) made 13 feature films and a documentary on *Bharat Natyam* dance. He co-directed one of these, *Neelakuyil* with P Bhaskaran. His early films upto *Ezhu Rathrikaal* have been discussed earlier. Seven more feature films that he made upto 1979 till shortly before his death, the same year, were not as remarkable as *Chemmen* but they did carry on the realist tradition. These are *Abhayam* (1970), *Maya* (1972), *Nellu* (1974), *Dweep* (1976), *Ammuvinte Attinkutty* and *Kondagali* (1978) and *Karimbu* (1979). He was briefly a Member of Rajya Sabha and acted in his friend and colleague, P Bhaskaran's 1956 film, *Rarichan Enna Pauran*. He could not complete Telugu *Kondagali* and *Karimbu*, his last, before his death; the first remained unedited and the second, completed by K Vijayan, was released in 1984.

P Bhaskaran

In the 1970s, P Bhaskaran was most prolific; he directed 30 features and produced seven, including six of his own. Of these, *Thurakkatha Vathil* ('The Unopened Door', 1970) is about a village simpleton who, not being able to support his mother and sister, goes to the city to earn for his sister's marriage; there he meets with a fatal accident. Not all his 47 feature films were offbeat but there was in him an unmistakable offbeat streak that manifested even in films, made with an eye to box-office success. He told this writer on 20 September 1994:

"I rolled between the lures of box-office and the offbeat but I preferred making realistic films, my own way. When an offer [to make an offbeat] came, I grabbed it. ...Films distracted me from writing poetry. If I had the choice, I would have made films, my way without compromising with formula ingredients. I started the literary trend (in Malayalam cinema)."

M T Vasudevan Nair

Nirmalyam (1973) by M T Vasudevan Nair won the President's Gold Medal for 1973. It is about an ancient temple in ruins, which nobody wants to maintain except an oracle (*Velichapad*) and a flower-picker (*Variyar*). The priest leaves in disgust; his place is taken by a cook's son. The oracle's son is caught, while trying to sell the deity's sacred sword. Smallpox breaks out and taking it to be a divine curse, the villagers organise a big festival to propitiate the goddess. Vices continue and on the festival day, the oracle dances wildly before the deity. Hitting his brow with a sceptre, he offers blood to expiate others' sins. Nair wrote the story and script of two more features- *Oppol* ('Elder Sister',

1981), directed by K Sethumadhavan and of *Panchagni* ('Five Fires', 1986)) by Hariharan. MTV Nair is also a prolific film critic, writing under the pen name of *Cinie*. He is at ease with a variety of themes, from mythology (*Vaishali*) to ballad (*Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha*) and from revenge (*Thaazhvaaram*) to teenage love (*Nakhaksthathangal*). In 1995, he won two State awards for writing the story of *Sukrutham* (1944) and the script of *Parinayam* which also got a national award. He was given the prestigious Jnanpith Award in 1996 for his contribution to Malayalam literature and cinema.

John Abraham

John Abraham (1938-1987) who died at the age of 49 was a talented filmmaker with an avowedly Marxist outlook. He gave up clerkship in Life Insurance Corporation to take a course in Pune Film Institute in 1969, where he assisted Mani Kaul in making *Uski Roti* (1969). He could complete only four films- two each in Malayalam and Tamil- all black & white. He was inspired by satirical films of Robert Bresson (*Au Hasard Balthazar*, 1965) and Louis Bunuel. From the very first, *Vidyarthikale Ithile Ithile* ('This Way, Students!', 1971) he took up the mantle of a hard critic of institutions. In it, he addressed students directly about the futility of strike in view of the corruption in the education system. He made his next feature in Tamil- *Agraharathile Oru Kazuthai* ('A Donkey in a Brahmin Enclave', 1977) to expose the rigidity of Kerala's social institutions (details follow in Tamil section). In his third feature, *Cheriyachente Kroora Krithyangal* ('Evil Deeds of Cheriyan', 1979), he dealt with fear and helplessness of the poor in the face of an oppressive ruling class. It is an allegory about a former landowner who panics over industrialisation and threats from communist militants. He changes when he finds the police killing poor peasant demonstrators; he holds his class responsible for the dastardly killings.

Abraham is best known for his last film, *Amma Ariyan* ('Open Letter to my Mother', 1986), an absorbing study of extremist politics, questioning its basic philosophy. A son writes letters to his mother from various spots, he visits from the northern highlands of Kerala to the crowded Cochin port in the south, looking for an activist who had committed suicide. The police commandeered the jeep he was travelling in, to carry the dead body of an unidentified person, hanging from a tree. The body seems familiar and haunts him; speculating about his death, he gives up his trip to Delhi. It mixed actuality footage and real-life persons (e.g. the quarry workers' strike) with fiction and personal sentiments with those of characters in the film.

P A Backer

P A Backer (1940-1993) was a journalist when he helped in the making of the first Malayalam neo-realist film, *Newspaper Boy* in 1955; for a while, he assisted Ramu Kariat too. Six years after producing P N Menon's *Olavum Theravum* ('Waves & Shore', 1969), he made his debut, *Kavani Nadi Chuvannappol* ('When river Kavani became red!', 1975) which was banned during the Emergency. A young woman loves

an extremist, who is eventually gunned down by the police. Kerala passed through a social turmoil in the 1960s and early 1970s, when peace in its river basin area was shattered by an extremist uprising. He was a true *avant-garde*, presaging the Leftist cinema in Kerala, nourished by John Abraham through his Odessa Movement.

He made 10 more films in the same ethos, of which the better known are *Chuvanna Vithukaal* ('Red Grains', 1977) and *Sanghaganam* ('The Chorus', 1979). The first was made during the 'soft porn' boom in Malayalam cinema, nourished by repatriated Gulf money. It was about a woman, marginalised by the society, who became a prostitute following a sexually exploitative relationship. *Sanghaganam* is openly political, being about an educated and cynical young man looking for a *guru* to tread the path of religion but when he sees the police torturing a Marxist trade unionist, he resolves to carry on his unfinished work of combating State terrorism. Many of his films were box-office disasters, or never distributed. He died prematurely at the age of 53 years.

P N Menon

Ramu Kariat landed P N Menon, born in 1928, in the cinema. His films were frankly political, as he thinks, "life cannot be thought of without politics". He made his debut with *Rosy* in 1965 but came to be really noticed for his second, *Olavum Theeravum* ('Waves & Shore', 1969) on the tragic love between a Muslim trader and a Hindu girl, a recurrent theme in Malayalam films since *Chemmeen*. It was produced by a loose cooperative, headed by P A Backer. Menon made 17 more features, notably *Kuttiyedathi* (1970), *Mapu Sakshi* (1971), *Panimudakku* (1971), *Chemparathy* (1972), *Chuvanna Vithukal* ('Red Seedling', 1977), *Sanghaganam* ('Chorus', 1979), *Maninte Maril Unarthupattu* (1980), *Charam* ('The Cash', 1981), *Kadamba & Asthram* (both in 1982) and *Malakalilae Daivam* ('God Atop Hill', 1983)- all dealing with various contemporary political and social concerns. Among these were two of his films, made in Tamil- *Devathai* (1979) and *Anu* (1980). Many of his films won national and State awards, notably *Gayathri* in 1973, winning both. He was quite prolific, making almost one feature film a year but stuck to the offbeat ethos. In *Charam*, he depicted the stark underworld of Mumbai, where a father searched for, and found, his lost daughter. His best known, *Malamukalilae Daivam* (1984) on a story by K Balakrishnan, is about social taboos in a mountain village in Wynad, overseen by a temple on a hill. It focussed on the long-drawn debate, whether tribals should be brought to the mainstream of the society, or left to their ethnic identity.

K R Pavithran

Pavithran made *Yaro Oral* in 1978 and *Uppu* ('Salt') in 1986. The first deals with the hazards of city life and the problems of the poor. *Uppu* deals with a young Muslim woman who with her humble husband and litigant father, leave home to settle elsewhere. A rich person, unhappy with his wife, marries her with the help of a Qazi. Years bring her disillusion and one night, she walks away in darkness. The film exposed religious hypocrisy and misuse of Islamic tenets, causing distress to poor people.

K G George

K G George (born 1945), a Syrian Christian, graduated from the FTII, Pune in direction in 1971 and made his first feature, *Swapnadanam* ('Somnambulism', 1975), which got national and State awards. He made eight more films, of which the best known is *Kolangal* ('Caricatures') in 1980. The story by P J Antony is set in a village where a ferryman and an old rich drunkard crave the young daughter of a coolie and biscuit-selling woman; she falls in love instead with a bangle-seller. Incensed by her affair with the lowly trader, her mother (father dying, meanwhile) hurries to get her married but with her secret affair circulating, no man wants to marry her. She is forced to marry an aged drunkard, which goad her to commit suicide. George's other films are *Vyamoham* (1977), *Onappudava* ('The Onam Gift'), *Mannu* ('Soil') and *Rappadigalude Gatha* ('The Song of a Nightingale', all in 1978), *Yavanika* ('The Curtain Falls', 1982), *Lekhayude Maranam Oru Flash Back* (1983), *Adaminte Variyellu* ('Adam's Rib', 1984) and *Irakal* ('The Victims', 1986). His films often deal with social and political issues but in thriller-like plots, e.g. *Yavanika*.

P Padmarajan

P Padmarajan, born in 1946, was an announcer with A I R and wrote 15 novels and many scripts, before making films, some of which raised controversies. Four of his films qualified for Indian Panorama- *Peruvazhiyambalam*, *Oridathu Oru Phayalvaan*, *Koodevide?* and *Thinkalazhcha Nalla Divasam*. His debut, *Peruvazhiyambalam* ('Wayside Inn', 1979), given national award for the best Malayalam feature in 1980, is about a *Vaniya* young man's disillusion in life. He was living with his sisters in a colony where a rapist, returning from a jail term, used to bully him. In rising anger, he stabs him in a festival and goes underground where he lives with a householder, a teashop owner and an easy-going woman, by turn. When eventually he returns to his village, nobody quite accepts him for fear of the police.

Padmarajan's next, *Oridathu Oru Phayalvaan* ('There lived a wrestler.', 1981), which got the best film award at Asian Film Festival in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) in 1982, is based on his own sarcastic story about a simple-minded wrestler's rise to fame and fortune and his gradual decline after marrying the prettiest girl in the village, whom he cannot satisfy, physically and emotionally. The same year, he made *Kallan Pavithran* (1981) and two years later, *Koodevide?* ('Where is the nest?', 1983). The second is about a Syrian Christian MP's son in a public school in Ooty, who is fascinated by a lady teacher showering affection on him but leaves her, when she is struck by a tragedy. He made over a dozen more feature films, of which the notable are *Parannu Parannu Parannu* (1984), *Thinkalazhcha Nalla Divasam* ('Monday, Good Bye', 1985), *Arapatta Kettiya Gramathel* (1985) and *Aparan* (1988). *Thinkalazhcha Nalla Divasam* is about a family reunion to celebrate the 60th birthday of an old widow who lives alone in a village.

Fazil

Fazil's best known, *Ente Mamattukkuttiyamnikku* (1983) is about an adopted girl

who brings cheer to a couple whose only child had drowned during a cruise. She turns out to be the pre-marital child of a couple who later marry and demand her. Coming to know the truth, her foster parents refuse to part with her but ultimately concede. His other films are *Dhanya* (1981), *Ettillam* (1982), *Marakkillorikkalum* (1983) and *Nokketha Doorathu Kannum Nattu* ('Looking at Infinity', 1984). The last is about a fussy, lonely and rich old widow, enlivened by the sudden arrival of a cheery grand daughter. She finds out that the girl has run away to avoid an operation. The widow persuades her to go for it but hopes that she would return, some day, to fill her life with joy again. His first film, *Manjil Virinja Pookkal* (1980) was a musical and in spite of new artistes and unknown technicians became an instant success.

B G Bharathan

Although he made more than 30 features, B.G. Bharatan is best known for *Ormakkayi* ('In Your Memory', 1982). An old friend takes a woman prisoner, out of jail to an orphanage where she had left her daughter, five years ago. She has a reverie of her pre-prison life but when she takes her child in arms, she realizes that her life cannot be the same again. Earlier, he made *Prayanam* (1975), *Guruvayoor Kesavan* and *Aniyara* (both in 1977), *Rathi Nirvedam* (1978), *Takara* (Tamil) in 1979 and *Lorry* (1980). After *Ormakkayi*, he made *Kattaathe Kilikoodu* ('A Bird's Nest in the Wind'), the same year. It was acclaimed in the Indian Panorama of 1984. He made *Chamaram*, *Palangal*, *Nidra*, *Aravam*, *Marmaram* and *Chattu* since and also a number of Tamil films like *Man Vasanal* and *Podumai Pen* (1983). Many of his films deal with the sanctity of virginity and marital bond and their violations.

Rathi Nirvedam ('Offer of Love'), widely seen outside Kerala, is a telling film of secret, illicit sex between a grown-up girl and a younger adolescent boy, living as neighbours since childhood. The boy has sex with her in a stormy night, away from their homes, where a snake bites her and she dies; the boy goes to town for higher study. Born in 1946, Bharatan was a publicity designer and an art director before making his instantly popular debut, *Prayanam* in 1975.

Many of his films received significant national and State awards. Bharathan's *Oru Minnamunginte Nurungu Vettam* ('Glimpse of a Flying Fireball', 1988) qualified for the Indian Panorama; it was about a childless couple whose life is enlivened by an ex-student of the wife who dies during delivery. They look after the child until the father takes it away. After two years, another of his films, *Thazhavaram*, 1990 also made it to the Panorama. He made seven more films thereafter, of which the best known was *Thevar Magan* in 1992, inspired by the Western classic, *Godfather*. Produced, written by and featuring the Tamil superstar, Kamalahasan in the title role, the film is about bloody feuds between members of a clan, headed by Mayathevar.

G S Panicker

G.S. Panicker's best-known film is *Pandavapuram* (1986), shown in Indian Panorama in 1987. It swung between reality and fantasy, experienced by a sensitive

woman who has many a heartbreak. Based on an Academy award-winning novel by Sethu, it turned out to be 'not everybody's film'. An earlier feature, *Ekakini* (1978), based on M T V Nair's story, is about a young woman's disillusion about her husband; it received State awards for best film and best editing. Panicker, a graduate from the FTII, Pune in direction, went to Canada to make short television films before making *Ekakini*, which lay in cans for three years. His other films- *Prakruthi Manohari* about freedom struggle and *Sahyante Makan*, based on a poem by Vailoppulli- were made for children in 1982. He also directed a film in Kannada, *Romanchana* in 1987.

T Hariharan

T Hariharan leapt to fame with *Panchagni* in 1986. Almost simultaneously, an extremist uprising by mostly intelligent young people shook West Bengal and Kerala, who killed money-lenders, landlords and the police, taking them as the 'enemy of the people'. Like John Abraham's *Amma Ariyan*, Hariharan's *Panchagni* is set in this milieu. A woman political activist, imprisoned for murder, goes on a hunger strike in a prison, sparking off a controversy inside, and then in the press. She is granted two-week's parole to visit her dying mother but her brother resents her presence. She turns to a journalist who manages a remission of her sentence by blackmailing a minister. Coming out, she shoots a friend's husband for raping a servant girl and returns to jail again. The film was an instant box-office success. His other films followed- *College Girl*, *Ayalathe Sundari*, *Love Marriage* and *Raja Hamsan*; each of them did well in box-office.

Lenin Rajendran

The best known of Lenin Rajendran's films is *Meenamasathile Sooryan* ('Mid-Summer Sun', 1986) in the background of the Quit India Movement, 1942. Four young men, awaiting death sentence for subversion and treason, are asked to cite their last wish. They want to meet their school teacher who had inspired them and villagers to rise against exploiting landlords. His *Prem Nazirine Kananilla* ('Prem Nazir is missing!', 1983) is on the Malayalam super-star who got into the Guinness Book of Records for acting in over 400 films. His other films are *Swathi Thirunal*, for which he got the State award for best director, *Venal* ('The Summer'), *Chillu* ('The Fragments'), *Puravaritham* ('The Post'), *Vachanam* ('The Word') and *Daivathinte Vikruthikal* ('The Ways of God', 1992), the last making it to the Indian Panorama in 1994. It was about a French magician of sorts, Alphonso who settled in the Pondicherry enclave of Mahe (north of Kerala) but refused to migrate to France when in 1954 the colonial rulers left.

His 2000 feature, *Mazha* ('Rain') is about the ill effects of arranged marriage when love disappears. A doctor's daughter moves with her parents from Bangalore to their ancestral village. While teaching in a local school, she meets a girl in a temple where hearing a moving recital, they trace a singer. He initiates her into music and sets a poem by her to tune. They become intimate and under his influence, she gives up Western dress and animal meat. Discovering the affair, her father gives her in marriage to a computer engineer who turns an alcoholic, suspects her fidelity and discovers her affair with the

music teacher in an old diary. After his death, she returns to the ancestral village to find that the woman with whom her father had arranged the music teacher's marriage is also dead and the teacher, having cancer in throat, can no longer sing.

T V Chandran

In the 1990s, a major Malayalam director burst on the national scene. T V Chandran's *Alicinte Anweshanam* and *Ponthan Moda* were acclaimed in Indian Panorama in 1994 and 1995. He got the national award for best director of 1995 'for a masterly rendering of a whole range of human experience into celluloid poetry' in *Ponthan Moda*. His 1994 film, *Alicinte Anweshanam* was shown in Locarno Festival. Hailing from Tellicherry, he was self-taught and had made two films before- *Krishanan Kutty* and *Hemavin Kathalargal*. *Ponthan Moda* is about an untouchable tribal who cleaves to his master through thick and thin. He has since become a regular celebrity in Indian Panorama, featuring his three more films- *Ormakalundayairikkanam*, *Mangamma* and *Padam Onnu: Oru Vilapam*- in 1996, 1999 and 2003 respectively. The last film is set in a northern Kerala village where girls become mothers at the age of 15 and grandmothers at 30. Muslim girls are not allowed to study beyond school. One such girl returns to her parents with her baby, as they fail to give the full dowry. Her husband visits them to recover the remaining dowry and takes help of a local match-maker. A tortuous plot thereafter reveals the abysmal plight of Muslim women in the village.

Shaji N Karun

Another Malayalam director of great promise is Shaji N Karun, who wielded camera for many of G. Aravindan's films before making his debut, *Piravi* (1988), making a sensation in 1990 IFFI and Panorama. It is a touching tale of a father, waiting vainly for the return of his son from the city, not knowing that he had been killed by the police in the students' hostel for engaging in extremist politics. He goes to the city with his daughter to find out the truth about his son. The film was so well-received everywhere that it won 24 national and international awards. Fine photography by himself of the monsoon rains and the humid landscape of Kerala visually enriched the film. Two more of his films also made it to the Indian Panorama- *Swaham* ('My Own') in 1995 and *Vanaprastham* ('The Last Dance') in 2000. *Swaham* is about a young widow who is anguished after selling her cow and a calf to get his son recruited to the Army with bribes but tragedy strikes when he dies in a stampede in the queue.

Vanaprastham is set in a south Kerala village in 1930s. An illegitimate son of a farm woman (by the owner), Kunjukuttan excels in *Kathakali* and at 18, is forced into an unhappy marriage with a daughter of the crafty farm owner. While his career in *Kathakali* blossoms, he has no peace in home; he takes to liquor with fellow musicians. He is seduced by a high-society woman, Subhadra who falls for him in the role of Arjuna in the *Mahabharata*. She confides that she is bearing his child but not to distress him, goes away from him. She brings up the child, naming him after Arjuna's son by Subhadra in the epic, Abhimanyu. She takes the boy, one day, to see his father's performance.

Seeing him, Kunjukuttan breaks down; struck meanwhile by many other tragedies. He decides, perturbed by many tragedies, to give his last performance as Arjuna with his own daughter, Sarada doing Subhadra's role in her childhood home. Deeply moved by their performance, Subhadra leaves before the end. Next day, Kunjukuttan disappears, leaving a note for Subhadra.

K S Sethumadhavan

K S Sethumadhavan was inspired to filmmaking by Hollywood classics that he saw aplenty. He formed a production unit, *Manjilas* along with actor Sathyan and M O Joseph, which produced his early films. His offbeat debut, *Aranazhikaneram* ('Just Half an Hour', 1970) is about a decadent family, seen through the eyes of its grand old patriarch. He is poisoned by an opium-dealer, having an affair with his daughter-in-law who eventually commits suicide. *Adimakal* (1969) also avoided the beaten track. He made two more offbeat films until 1992- *Anubhavangal Palichakal* ('Shattered Experience', 1971) and *Oppol* ('Elder Sister', 1981). The first is a rendering of a Thakazi novel, featuring the matinee idol, Satyan. Suspecting his working wife of having been involved in a murder, a husband runs away from her; the wife toils hard to eke out a living with the children. *Oppol* is based on M T Vasudevan Nair's story of a six-year old boy's life with a woman whom it knows as its elder sister but who is actually its mother. Sethumadhavan told this author on 22nd March 1994: "No film gave me more creative satisfaction than *Pani Theeratha Veedu* ('Unfinished Home', 1964).

Three of his films- *Oppol* (1981), *Marupakkam* (1991) and *Stri* (1995) - were acclaimed in Indian Panorama. He focusses in social justice issues and on extra-marital relation (*Marupakkam*) and deviant romance (*Stri*). The last is about a young woman's love for a jail bird, who, out of it occasionally, goes to other women but she nevertheless cleaves to him. During a long river journey, she helps him steal some goods from the boat at night. She is caught but let off at the intervention of a traveling writer.

Sibi Malayil

Sibi Malayil is not quite an offbeat director but his themes avoid the beaten track. Two of his films that qualified for the Indian Panorama- *Bharatham* ('Symphony', 1991) & *Kanakkinavu* (1995) - were also box-office successes. *Bharatham* is intended to be a musical, portraying the fall of a great classical musician through drunkenness. His brother, taught by him, gradually replaces him. *Kanakkinavu* is about two tree-fellers- one Hindu and the other Muslim. After the Muslim tree-feller dies in an accident, his Hindu friend brings up his children while the two communities clash. Muslims force the Hindu foster parents to send the children to a Muslim orphanage. His 2002 film, *Ente Veedu...Appoontem* ('My Home...Appu's too') is about a happy family of a couple and a son, Vasudev by another wife who passed away when the child was two. The stepmother gives birth to a son whom Vasu names Appu. Feeling neglected, Vasu kills Appu, spraying pesticide, leaving the family distraught but is forgiven by the stepmother. A police officer arrests Vasu on the basis of the postmortem report and is sentenced to

jail. She conceives again and gives birth to another son but wants to give Vasu a surprise when she comes out of jail. He returns home and is overjoyed to see the baby and names him Appu again.

S Balachandra Menon

S Balachandra Menon set to making low-budget films, beginning with *Uthradha Rathri* in 1978. Over the years, he made more than 30 feature films. His *Samaantharangal* ('Parallel Lives', 1998) made it to the Indian Panorama and fetched him a national award for 'Best Actor'; the film was also adjudged the Best Feature on family welfare, apparently for depicting the joy and harmony in a growing family. An honest and hard-working Muslim railway station master detects sabotage on the track on the day of a railway *bandh*. He signals an approaching train to stop which it does not and runs over him. His *April Pathinettu* ('April 18', 1984), based on his own story, is about a police officer whose wife suspects him as having an affair with the wife of a convict- once his friend- and leaves him. Her father, seeking a legal divorce, lands in unpleasant proceedings. While they live separately, nostalgic about their happy togetherness, a lawyer-neighbour reconciles them.

Others

Among other Malayalam offbeat directors (and their major films) of the second generation are Madhu (*Sindura Cheppu*, 1971), Yusuf Ali Kecheri (*Maram*, 1972), Thoppil Bhasi (*Enipadikal*, 1973), C Radhakrishnan (*Agni*, 1978), K R Mohanan (*Ashwathama*, 1978, *Purushartham*, 1987 and *Swaroopam*, 1992), Padmakumar (*Aparna*, 1981), A Raghavan (*Kilippatt*, 1985), Mohan (*Vidaparayum Mumbe*, 1981), Ambili (*Veena Poovu*, 1982), John C Sankaramangalam (*Samaandaram*, 1985), Joseph Madapally (*Swathi Thirunal*, 1987 and *Thoranam*, 1987). Mention should also be made of I V Sasi (*Aalkoottathil Thaniye* and *Kana Marayathu*, both 1984 and 1991, 1988), Kamal (*Ulladakkam*, 1992), M Mohan (*Rachna*, 1983 & *Ilakkangal*, 1981), Pavithran (*Uppu*, 1986), Pratap Pothan (*Hrithuvedam*, 1987) and K P Kumaran who returned to make a powerful film, *Thotran* ('A Hymn to Deity', 2000) after 12 years since his award-winning *Rugmini* (1988)- a homage to an unknown poet. G N Panikkar made *Ekakini* (1978) on his story about a woman's disillusion about men. He also wrote the story and script of I V Sasi's *Aalkoottathil Thaniye* ('Alone in the Crowd', 1984).

XIV. Offbeat in Tamil and Telugu Cinemas

“Offbeat films cannot be popular in Tamil, because people who worship cine stars cannot bear to see them in earthy offbeat roles.”

—K S Sethumadhavan

There is an un-erasable cultural divide between north and south India with the Vindhya range between them, which is reflected in their arts. This has also made north and south Indian cinemas apart in themes and conventions, except social evils like dowry and misalliance, caste conflicts, untouchability and political cynicism. Films in the south are made in four major languages- Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam. Phonetically and etymologically, these are very different from Hindi or any other northern, western or eastern language, although some of their vocabularies are derived from Sanskrit. South India's first full-fledged offbeat film, *Sanskara* (1970) was made in Kannada, 15 years after *Pather Panchali*, although in volume Kannada cinema is the thinnest among the four major cinemas. The genre blossomed much more in Malayalam than in three other languages.

Offbeat in Tamil

In the mid-1990s Tamil cinema, the second most prolific in the South, was like Telugu, having no distinct offbeat genre. In the 1950s, when ripples of 'neo-realist' cinema were forming in Kerala and Karnataka, C N Annadurai and his party, DMK were using cinema as a political tool to reform the society. As he gradually got involved in DMK politics, he passed his cinematic mantle to M Karunanidhi, his political disciple and later Chief Minister of Tamilnadu, who had the same outlook on cinema. In this reformist ambience came a film, *Andha Naal* (1954), having no song or dance and dealing with a realist theme. Produced by A V Meiyappan and directed by S Balachander, it cast Shivaji Ganesan in the role of a traitor, selling secrets to an enemy country.

The urge became stronger in the films of K. Balachander, Bharathiraja and Mani Rathnam, Balu Mahendra, J Mahendran and a few others. Though Tamil offbeat cinema was not much influenced, or inspired, by Bengali pioneers, the maker of an early Tamil offbeat was a Bengalee, **Nimai Ghosh**, the maker of *Chhinnamul* (1951), who having settled in Chennai, later became an ace cinematographer of many major Tamil films until he made his Tamil debut feature, *Pathai Theriyuthu Par* in 1960. His last film was *Sooravalli* in Tamil in 1981, seven years before his death.

K Balachander

K Balachander, a prolific director, confidently making films in Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Hindi, made over 75 films of which only a handful tended to offbeat. Three of his films qualified for the Indian Panorama- *Avargal* ('Characters', 1977), *Thaneer Thaneer* ('Water, Water!', 1981) and *Achamillai Achamillai* ('Fearless', 1984). *Avargal* is about a man and a woman in love, who marry but separate; the woman is forced to marry a sadistic officer whom his father served. After childbirth, she gets a divorce and a job in Chennai. She meets her former lover and husband and they renew affair. He had changed little and again tries to nip her aspirations for a new life. She finds a company and support in her repentant mother-in-law.

Thaneer, Thaneer is about a hamlet whose women collect drinking water from a hilly spring, some 30 kilometres away. Villagers refuse to vote unless a well is dug nearby. They give some money to an absconding murderer to buy a bullock for fetching water from the spring and shield him from police-hunt. Incensed by the villagers' refusal to surrender him, a local politician kills the bullock. Undaunted, he takes the help of villagers to bring water from a distant riverbed but some petty officials stop it, alleging encroachment. A constable's wife prevents his arrest but as more policemen come, the villagers make him flee to a jungle where he dies. It became a sensation in 1982 *Filmotsava* in Kolkata and won the President's awards for Best Tamil Film and Best Screenplay.

Achamillai, Achamillai ('Fearless', 1984), set in a hilly village, nestling among waterfalls, is about a woman textile factory worker who kills her husband, a politician with a knife, hidden in a garland, because his corrupt activities provoke a communal riot.

Bharatiraja

Bharatiraja (real name Chinnaswamy), born in 1944 in Madurai, made over 30 films since his debut, *Pathinari Vayathiniley* ('Sweet Sixteen', 1977), praised for its 'poetic touch and penchant for realism'. Four of his films made it to the Indian Panorama- *Nizhalgal* ('The Shadows', 1980), *Seethakoka Chilaka* (Telugu, 1981), *Mudhal Mariyadhai* ('Prime Honour', 1985) and *Vedam Puthithu* ('New Vedas', 1987). *Pathinari Vayathiniley* was produced outside Chennai's studio system; Sridevi came to be widely known through this film. A village girl pines for a prince charming in a city but eventually marries a timid villager (Kamalhasan) who while trying to save her from a clownish person, accidentally kills him and is sentenced to jail.

Mudhal Mariyadhai, on a story by R Selvaraj, is about the eventful life of an old former landowner, living in a hut beside a river and insisting on seeing before dying its owner, a fisherman's jailed daughter. She returns from the prison and holds his hand. *Nizhalgal* is about two village youths' varied experiences and frustrations in a city, not quite characteristic of Bharatiraja.

Among his other films, the most significant is *Alaigal Oolvathilai* ('Tides Don't Stop', 1981), dealing with love between a Brahmin boy and a Christian girl. Like three

other Rajas in Tamil cinema- Bhagyaraja, Selvaraja and Ilyaraja- Bharatiraja came from a small town in Madurai and learnt filmmaking from the Kannada stalwart, Puttana Kanagal.

Together, the four Rajas brought a whiff of fresh air in Tamil cinema; they wrote clipping dialogue in spoken Tamil and cast new faces which are commonly seen. In music, they blended folk with classical. The team broke up after sometime but Bharatiraja maintained his consistency in making offbeat and melodramatic films in Hindi and Telugu too. *Vedham Puthithu* (*New Vedas*, 1987) focussed on youngsters' protests against retrograde ideas and prejudices of caste, colour, creed and superstition, which add up to create a stormy atmosphere. It won the San Thome Award and was adjudged the 'Best Film on Other Issues'.

Mani Rathnam

Although he has gone commercial over the years, Mani Rathnam's early films were promising offbeat. Four of his films were shown in the Indian Panorama- *Mouna Raagam* (1986), *Nayakan* (1987), *Anjali* (1990) and *Roja* (1992). Cinema was in his family; father Venus was a noted actor. His first film was in Kannada- *Pallavi Anu Pallavi*, which was awarded by the Karnataka government for Best Screenplay. *Mouna Raagam* is about a young girl's dream of romantic love, shattered on the rock of an arranged marriage.

Nayakan is an adaptation of the Italian novel, *Godfather*, set in the underworld of Mumbai. Gangstar, Varadarajan Mudaliar (Kamalahasan) runs away from Chennai after the police kill his extremist father; he takes a pseudonym, Velu Naicker and lives in Mumbai. His ruthlessness and Robinhood-type altruism in notorious Dharavi slums make him a leader of the minority Tamil community. His daughter walks out of his criminal ambience and marries a senior police officer. He is ultimately killed by a mentally retarded youth whom he had kept in his care. The film drew on the 30 years' political history of Tamilnadu and stoked Tamilians' anti-Hindi sentiments.

Anjali (1990) is about a mentally retarded girl who is brought home from a spastics institute to live with her parents and two normal siblings. She is showered with love and affection until she dies just after pronouncing her mother's name, for the first time.

Roja (1992), based on his own story, is about a computer scientist's abduction by Kashmiri militants and eventual release after dramatic events. He marries a village girl for love of the countryside and poor folk. While in Srinagar on office tour, he is abducted by Kashmiri militants. His naive wife runs from pillar to post to secure his release. He refuses to be freed in exchange of a hardcore killer and eventually escapes from the abductors, braving odds and returns to his wife. *Roja* made Mani Rathnam a household name in India and abroad and brought him a wide renown and his producer a huge fortune. Rathnam's later films have been so replete with group songs, dances and violence that they can no longer be called offbeat.

Balu Mahendra

Balu Mahendra came first in cinematography course in the FTII, Pune in 1975 and photographed films of Ramu Kariat, P N Menon, Bapu and K. Vishwanath before making his own. Four of his films made to the Indian Panorama- debut *Kokila* in Kannada (1977), *Azhiyatha Kolangal* (1979), *Veedu* ('The House', 1988) and *Sandhiya Ragam* (1990). *Veedu*, being about 'having a roof of one's own, over the head, a house, a home', was his response to the UN Declaration of Year 1987 as the 'International Year of Shelter for the Homeless'. It was adjudged the 'Best Tamil Film' of the year.

He also made *Olangal* in Malayalam, *Nireekshana* in Telugu and *Sadma* in Hindi. He was also the Chairman of the Jury of the 1993 Delhi Festival (25th IFFI) and received national awards for cine photography in 1977 (black & white) and 1982 (colour). His most popular film, *Moonram Pirai* ('Crescent Moon on the Third Day', 1982) is about a teacher who brings home a mentally unsound prostitute from a brothel. She becomes utterly devoted to him; he is sexually attracted to her but cannot consummate it because of his wife. The prostitute recovers and leaves, rendering the teacher virtually insane.

J Mahendran

J Mahendran's films generally deal with women's problems. *Nenjathai Killathe* ('Don't Pinch the Heart', 1981) is about a girl who grows from adolescence to womanhood, searching for an identity. Born in 1939, Mahendran edited a Tamil periodical, *Tughlak* before writing cinema scripts. Two of his films were selected for the Indian Panorama- *Utharipokal* (1979) and *Nenjathai Killathe* (1981). His films are more akin to the so-called 'middle cinema' than to the offbeat. His debut, *Mullum Malarum* ('A Thorn and a Flower') in 1978 deals with a married brother's excessive attachment to a young sister whom he ultimately persuades to marry. *Poottadha Poottugal* ('Unlocked Doors', 1980) is about illicit sex and pregnancy.

Others

Jayabharati, Komal Swaminathan, K. Hariharan, Shridhar Rajan and Arun Mozhi also made realist films. **Jayabharati**, a literary person, made his film debut, *Uchchi Veyil* ('Midday Sun') in 1989; it is about an ordinary family whose members have very complex relations among themselves. The film, enacted by inexperienced artistes and without any song or dance (rare in Tamil cinema), was shot on the streets of Chennai, using natural sounds. **Komal Swaminathan's** *Oru Indiya Kanavu* ('An Indian Dream', 1983) features the noted Tamil star, Suhasini in the role of an intellectual woman who interacts with tribal people in countryside to identify and expose a non-tribal who rapes an *Adivasi* (tribal) woman. As she proceeds in her investigation, she is threatened and persecuted by local functionaries and powers-that-be. **K Hariharan** who with Mani Kaul and Saeed Mirza launched a short-lived film co-operative *Yukt*, made his debut, *Ezhavathu Manithan* ('The Seventh Man') in 1982 about collusion between politicians and industrialists in degrading the environment.

Others who made offbeat films in Tamil are John Abraham, Fazil, K. Vijayan, Robert Rajashekharan, T Rajendran, S S Rao, Sridhar Rajan, Rudraiah, Pratap Pothen, Durai, I V Sasi, Abhaavanan; Krishnamachari Balaji, R C Sakthi, Mannivanan, Aravindraaj, P Shanmugam, S S Chandrasekhar, Sunder C and Amshan Kumar. Not all of them were making only offbeat films, or only in Tamil.

Late **John Abraham**, Malayalam director, made a most significant Tamil offbeat film, *Agraharathil Oru Kazhuthai* ('A Donkey in a Brahmin Enclave', 1977), an awkward satire on bigoted Brahmins. A donkey strays into the Brahmin enclave of a village. An old bachelor Brahmin teacher adopts it as a mascot, despite elders' mocking remarks. He entrusts its care to a mute girl who is raped by a villager. When her stillborn child is found before a temple, Brahmins attribute its fatherhood to the donkey and have the animal killed. This induces miraculous visions in priests, making them worship the donkey's carcass. When it is being cremated with rituals, the fire of the pyre engulfs the entire village, sparing only the teacher and the mute girl. Expectedly, it was not well-received in Tamilnadu but was widely appreciated in Kerala.

Four alumni of Tamil Nadu Film Institute at Adyyar- **P R Devaraj**, **Mannivannan**, **Rudraiah** and **Aravindraaj**- made only offbeat films in Tamil. Devaraj's *Sendhoora Poove* (1988), shot in exotic locations, had a suspenseful climax. **Mannivannan** made a thriller, *Nooravathunaal* in 1984, followed by a social, *Engayum Oru Gangai*, the same year. **Rudraiah** made *Giramathu Athiyayam* ('A Chapter in a Village Storm', 1980) and two years later, *Aval Etiya Deepam* but would not like his works to be called 'art films', because Tamil people do not like the label. **Aravindraaj** made *Oomai Vizhigal* in 1986. **K Vijayan**'s *Doorathu Idi Muzhakkam* ('Faraway Thunder', 1979) which featured in Indian Panorama, was about an illegitimate child and its mother in a fishing community against exotic seascape.

Durai's *Pasi* ('Hunger', 1979), adjudged the Best Tamil film of 1979 (Best Actress award also went to its female lead, Shova who died afterward in a tragic circumstance), is also about unmarried motherhood. Her fiancé and his wife joyfully bring up the child after she dies during delivery. **Nivas**'s *Kallukul Iram* ('Moisture inside Stone', 1980) is similar in theme to Mrinal Sen's *Aakaler Sandhaney*, made the same year, dealing with some villagers' reactions to a film unit, shooting the story of their lives. Villagers themselves enacted some roles and Bharathiraja played the film director. **Robert Rajasekharan** made *Palaivana Salai* ('Oasis in Desert', 1981), **T Rajendran** directed *Rail Payanangalil* ('Train Journeys', 1987); **S S Rao** made *Raja Parvai* ('King's Sight', 1981) and **Sridhar Rajan** *Kann Sivanthal Man Sivakkum* ('Executioner's Hymn') in 1982 and *Iravu Pookkal* in 1986. The influence of Latin America's 'Third Cinema' is very evident in *Kann Sivanthal Man Sivakkum*. It is about a group of revolutionary tendencies and a *Bharatnatyam* danseuse, returned from abroad- both very anglicised- and their search for cultural roots in Tamilnadu. Tamil mainstream director, **A Bhimsingh**'s two films qualified for Indian Panorama in 1978 and 1979 for their offbeat ethos- *Sila Nerangali Sila Manithargal* (1977) and *Oru Nadigal Nadakam Parkiral* (1978). Tamil mainstream director, **A Bhimsingh**'s two films qualified for

Indian Panorama in 1978 and 1979 for their offbeat ethos- *Sila Nerangali Sila Manithargal* (1977) and *Oru Nadigal Nadakam Parkiral* (1978).

Arun Mozhi exposed and denounced political corruption in Tamil Nadu through his debut, *Kanni Nilam* ('A Piece of Land', 1988). He is good at satire against Brahmins and once nearly went behind the bars for doing so. A farmer is evicted from his land, purportedly for construction of a hospital but actually for building a five-star hotel through the sly manoeuvres of a politician. **Pratap Pothan** made *Meenam Oru Kathal Kathai* (1985); after lying in cans for some time, it was released to acclaim and won a national award for its story of love, swinging between reality and fantasy. **R C Sakthi** made *Shiraj* in 1984; **P Shanmugam** made *Kani Nilam* in 1987 and **S S Chandrasekhar** directed *Vasanth Raghav* and *Sivappu Malargal*, both in 1986. **I V Sasi**, who made sensational *Her Nights* in Malayalam, made an offbeat film in Tamil, *Illam* in 1988. Some re-makes also tended toward offbeat, like Fazil's *En Bommu Kkuthi Ammavukku* (1988) from Malayalam and Krishnamachari Balaji's *Vidhi* (1984) from Telugu. **B Lenin**'s *Ooruku Nooruper* ('A Hundred Voices for a Cause', 2001), which made it to the next year's Indian Panorama, dealt with a young artist who disillusioned with politics, becomes a kind of Robin Hood, indulging in arson and looting. He ends up in jail, waiting for the gallows while an organisation which supported his misdeeds, carries on, believing that "the cause is always more important than the individual".

After acting in over 180 Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Hindi films since the age of six, megastar **Kamalahasan** turned to filmmaking, his unfulfilled dream, in year 2000. The debut's title, *Hey Ram* was the last two words of Mahatma Gandhi when a Hindu fanatic shot him in Delhi on 30 January 1948. The film, however, focusses more on love and sex than on the 'father of the nation' and despite commercial claptrap, tended to offbeat. A Vaishnavite Brahmin of Thanjavur marries a Bengali girl (Rani Mukherjee), little imagining that the casteist politics will, one day, enrage mobs to break through his door and abuse him for the interracial marriage. Helped by a Hindu fundamentalist outfit, he plans revenge and travels through metropolises with seething rage. Like *Hindutva* followers, he regards Mahatma as 'enemy of the people', goes through many odds till he meets a long-lost Pakistani friend (Shah Rukh Khan) and realizes the underlying Hindu-Muslim fraternity beneath the animus and divide, created by politicians. The film is imbued with his so-called 'pop patriotism', carried over from the megahit *Hindustani* (1997), in which he left a superb performance.

In spite of all these unconventional directors, Tamil offbeat genre is still very slim. The better offbeat filmmakers in Tamil have been Keralites, e.g. K S Sethumadhavan, John Abraham, T.V.Chandran and B.G.Bharathan, although Tamilians contributed greatly to the development of the Malayalam film industry in its early stages.

Offbeat in Telugu

The offbeat genre which surfaced in Kannada and Malayalam cinema from early 1970s emerged in Telugu cinema much later. In number, Telugu films swung between the second and third places in all-India production for years but with fewer offbeat films than

in other major languages. As in Tamil Nadu, cinema influences politics in Andhra Pradesh too; the election of late N T Rama Rao, thrice as the Chief Minister, indicated the hold superstars have on common people's imagination. Scripts are written at their dictates to furbish their political image, or just to satisfy their whims and fancies. That in a situation like this some offbeat films were indeed made speak of the courage and conviction of their makers.

Bapu [S Lakshminarayan]

S Lakshminarayan, aka Bapu, was an illustrator and art director in an advertising agency, when he made his film debut, *Saakshi* in 1967. He was well-known in Andhra Pradesh for his Rama series, beginning with *Sampoorna Ramayanam* in 1972 but somewhat off beat were his seven films- *Bangaru Pichika* (1968), *Budhimanthuda* (1969), *Balaraju Katha* (1970), *Inti Gowravam* (1970), *Andala Ramuda* (1973), *Mathyala Muggu* (1974) and *Rajadhi Raju* (1982).

K Vishwanath

Kasinadhuni Vishwanath was trained to be a sound engineer but pined for a career in cinema. In 1965, he made his first film, *Atmagowravam (Self Respect)*, which marked him out from the run-of-the mill filmmakers and won a State (*Nandi*) Award. He won a series of *Nandi* awards between 1971 and 1977 for *Kalam Maarindhi* (1972), *Chelleli Kaapuram* (1971), *Sarada* (1973), *Seetha Katha* (1974) and *Jeevan Jyothi* (1977). Of these, truly offbeat were *Swarna Kamalam* (1979) and *Shankaravaranam* (1979); the second became a huge box-office success too.

Swarna Kamalam is about a danseuse daughter of a noted Kuchipudi exponent, wooed by a painter of banners and hoardings, who uses her as a model. Her face in a banner by him launches her in a dance programme in an art academy. She dances pruriently in the Western style, deliberately to outrage him and her orthodox father who dies of shock. She eventually becomes a voluptuous cabaret dancer and seeing her, an American tourist offers a tour to the USA. On the day of her flight, the painter sends her a bouquet but as he returns home, bidding her goodbye at the airport, he finds her dancing in his house, having arrived before him. She has given up her lucrative career in the USA to live with him.

However, much more of a rave was his 1979 film, *Shankaravaranam*, named after an eponymous Carnatic *raga*. It carried forward the theme of *Swarna Kamalam*- the conflict between traditional Indian and Western entertainment forms; it was also dubbed in Hindi. Both the versions became box-office bonanzas for the vigorous dances by Manju Bhargavi and stirring music by M V Mahadevan. It got four national awards in 1980- for 'best feature film', 'best music direction' and 'best male and female playback singing'.

A courtesan approaches a revered Carnatic vocalist to take her as his disciple. She was forcibly married to a *zemindar* whom she killed and ran away from. After she is

acquitted, the *guru* accepts her, but as it generates social gossip, she leaves. Returning ten years later with an illegitimate child, she clears the singer's debt and puts her son to his tutelage. She builds an art theatre, which she wants the *guru* to inaugurate through a performance but he suffers a stroke while singing. Her son ably takes over from the cue, at which he declares him as his 'successor' and dies. Her dream fulfilled, she also dies at his feet. The richness of Carnatic music came full-throated in the golden voices of S P Balasubramaniam and Vani Jayaram who sang playback for the *guru* and the danseuse, respectably.

B Narasinga Rao

Bongu Narasinga Rao grew up to be a painter, musician, photographer and a theatre activist. In mid-1970s he was associated with the cultural wing of Naxalite peasant movement in north Andhra and produced and co-scripted Gautam Ghosh's debut on the theme, *Ma Bhoomi* (1979). Three of his feature films, based on his own stories- *Rangula Kala* ('A Colourful Dream', 1984), *Dassi* ('The Maid', 1988) and *Matti Manshulu* ('Men of Clay', 1990) made it to the Indian Panorama. *Rangula Kala* (1984) is about the politicisation of a young painter (like, and played by, himself); he also composed its music. Although it was not a box-office success, it could secure a release in Hyderabad amid the rage for mythological and social films.

His second and probably the best film, *Daasi* (1988) is very well-made and poignant. Developed on the cue of a journalist, it is about a young maid (played by Archana) who came, as part of a dowry with a wife, to the house of a big rural landowner whose brother-in-law, other relatives and even guests rape her. She conceives and is forced to abort the foetus. It got a national award and a Merit Certificate in Moscow Festival of 1989 but curiously, none from the Andhra Pradesh Government. The story is set in the 1920s in a Nizam territory where sexual abuse of maidservants was common. Former Prime Minister, P V Narashima Rao told its maker that only a fraction of what actually happens to such maid servants has been shown in the film.

His third film, *Matti Manshulu* (1990), distinctly offbeat, is about a group of rural migrants to a city, following a drought, who become construction labour and live miserably. It featured in the American Film Institute's Indian Cinema package, shown in many U.S. universities.

Outsiders

Curiously, two Bengalees- **Mrinal Sen** and **Gautam Ghosh**- made the two most well-known Telugu offbeat films- *Oka Corie Katha* and *Ma Bhoomi* respectively. (For details about OOK, see Chapter VII on Sen.) **Gautam Ghosh's** *Ma Bhoomi* (1980), a starkly political film, ran for about a year in Hyderabad. Set in the background of a peasant uprising, called *Telengana* Movement, inspired by the Communist Party in the late 1940s, it is about a young peasant revolting against the Nizam's corrupt rule. His girl friend has to acquiesce to the sexual advances of a local official. He befriends a Marxist

activist and joins the Freedom movement. After Independence, peasants take over the village and indulge in an orgy of killings. Ghosh made it in a documentary style under the influence of Latin American cinema. Another 'outsider' who contributed to Telugu offbeat is **Shyam Benegal** who made a Telugu version of his Hindi, *Anugraham* (1976), titled *Kondura*, the same year. Two Tamil filmmakers' Telugu films tended to offbeat- **Bharathi Raja** (*Seethakoka Chilaka*, 1982) and **K Balachander** (*Anthuleni Katha*, 1976, *Oka Thallikatha*, 1977 and *Maro Charithra*, 1978). Balachander got two of his Tamil films dubbed in Telugu- *Sringara Leela* (1976) and *Manmadha Leela* (1976).

Others

In the early 1980s, there was a sudden spurt of Telugu films, lampooning politicians; coinciding with the election campaign of N T Rama Rao; in fact, one such film, *MLA Yedu Kondalu* helped NTR win the election in 1994. It was remade in Hindi as *Aaj Ka MLA* (1984); **Dasari Narayan Rao** directed the Telugu original. There has also been a few Marxist filmmakers- **Madala Ranga Rao**, **L T Krishna** and **R Naryanamurthy**- but they could not gain ground in the ambience of commercial film, replete with rapes, fights, crimes and such other formula ingredients. Other Andhraites who occasionally made offbeat films are **Eranki Sharma** (*Chilakamma Cheppindi*, 1977), mainstream prolific **Dasari Narayana Rao** (*Soori Gadu*, 1992), **U V Rao** (*Nagna Satyam*, 1981), **C U Rao** (*Ankuram*, 1992), **M V Raghu** (*Kallu*, 1988), **Kranthi Kumar** (*Swathi*, 1984 & *Chinnari Chetana*- 3D, 1986), **P Sambasiva Rao** (*Mrigatrishna*, 1991) and **Vamsy** (*Manchu Pallaki*, 1982, *Sitara*, 1984 & *Anveshana*, 1986). Another son-of-the-soil, **Singeetham Srinivasa Rao** made three films- *Samskara* (1970), *America Ammayal* (1971) and *Mayuri* (1985). The last is a true story of a young dancer, Sudha Chandran, daughter of a noted danseuse, whose leg was amputated after an accident. She returns to dancing with a wooden foot, made and fixed by a Jaipur doctor. It was a rave run all over India. S S Rao was associate director to **K V Reddy** before he made his debut, *Neethi Nijayiti* in 1972. His other films are *Sommokadidhi Sokokadidhi* (1978), *Panthulamma* and *Tharam Marindi*- (both 1977)- all in Telugu but none surpassed *Mayuri*.

XV. Offbeat in Other Cinemas

“For millions of Indians, wherever they live, a major part of India derives from its movies.”

—Ashish Rajadhyaksha

Other regional cinemas which began mostly in the talkie era, were far behind major cinemas in giving forth an offbeat genre. Productions in these smaller cinemas are even otherwise very meagre. In fact, Manipuri, Bodo and Khasi films, mentioned in this chapter, are virtually the only films made in these tribal dialects. Only in Assamese, Oriya and Punjabi, there is a kind of mainstream.

Assamese

The first Assamese film, *Joyomati* in 1935 by Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, and subsequent films in the language until 1947 were processed in Kolkata. Bengali films run well in Assam, as spoken and written Assamese are similar to Bengali and its culture is akin, despite an anti-Bengali ethos prevailing since the early 1960s. Till that time, good Assamese students used to come for higher study to Kolkata; the rich and well-to-do Assamese distinguished themselves in many fields in the city, e.g. Prince Pramathesh Barua and Dr. Bhupen Hazarika in cinema. The Assamese cinema celebrated Golden Jubilee in 1985, although in 50 years, it did not flourish much (only 134 features were made), as cinema-halls are a few and filmmakers fewer. Dr. B. N. Saikia who became Chairman of the State Film Corporation in the mid-1980s, set out to build a chain of small theatres. The State Government's refund of part of amusement tax on cinema tickets from the early 1980s, helped a new genre of 'middle' cinema rise in Guwahati.

Dr. Bhupen Hazarika

Dr. Bhupen Hazarika's films were different and generally better than the run-of-the-mill Assamese films and in that sense, they were offbeat. His notable films came before Mrinal Sen's *Bhuban Shome* (discussed in Chapter VII). He was awarded *Padmashri* in 1977 and received, for lifetime achievement in cinema, the Dadasaheb Phalke Award in 1993. Later in life, Dr. Hazarika teamed with Kalpana Lajmi and sang as well as composed music for her *Ek Pal* and *Rudali*. He had been a member of Assam Legislative Assembly and later in life, was nominated to the Rajya Sabha by the President. He joined Bharatiya Janata Party in 2004 and contested that year's election to the *Lok Sabha*. His association with Bengali filmmakers also enriched his films. He made a Hindi film too, *Mera Dharam Meri Ma*, based on a play written by a school

student, in 1976 for the Government of Arunachal Pradesh. He not only nurtured the Assamese offbeat cinema but also gave fillip to the making of films in other northeastern languages- Manipuri, Bodo and Arunachali.

Dr. Bhabendra Nath Saikia

Dr. Hazarika's self-proclaimed 'purposeful' films were, albeit, a kind of offbeat in the thin stream of Assamese cinema but Dr. Bhabendra Nath Saikia and Jahnu Barua started a truer trend. Born at Nowgong in Assam in 1932, Dr. Saikia did M.Sc. in Physics from Kolkata Presidency College, Ph. D from London University and a diploma course from the Imperial College of Science and Technology, London in 1961. He made his films on his own often-morbid stories, which make them rather literary. His major films are *Sandhya Raag* ('Evening Song', 1977), *Anirban* ('The Vigil', 1981), *Agnisnaan* ('The Ordeal', 1985) and *Kolahal* ('The Turmoil', 1988), *Sarathi*, *Abartan* (1993) and *Itihas* (1995).

Sandhya Raag deals with cultural tension between backward villages and modern cities; the theme returned in Jahnu Barua's *Khagoroloi Bohu Door* (1995). Two daughters of a widow go to city to work as housemaids in well-to-do households. While the elder is treated well and adjusts to the city life, the younger has to resist the advances of the employer's son. They return to the village to get married but reverse culture shock disables them from adjusting to village life. Six more of his films featured in Indian Panorama- *Agnisnaan* (1985), *Kolahal* (1988), *Sarathi* (1991), *Aabartan* (1993), *Itihaas* (1995) and *Kaal Sandhya* (1997).

Agnisnaan ('The Ordeal') is about a rich rice-mill owner who takes a mistress and impregnates her. To retaliate, the first wife starts a secret affair with a village thief and conceives. This shocks her husband, because she has not let him touch her since his infatuation with the other woman. He demands her to divulge the embryo's fatherhood but she refuses to give out, adding that from now on, he has to live with the fact of her infidelity, or admit his own. Dr. Saikia often dealt with such feminist themes. In *Kolahal* (highly praised by *The Guardian* critic, Derek Malcolm when it was shown in 1989 Delhi Festival), is based on a radio play by him. A slum child steals rice from trucks passing by to keep him and his mother from starvation, as his father is away for work. He is killed, one day, when a truck overturns. The mother lives by working in a warehouse where a truck-cleaner makes advances to her. She resists but when she comes to know that her long-absent husband is living with another woman in a city, she responds to him in retaliation. *Sarathi* ('The Shelter') is about a retired man's obsession to build his own house himself, as he can no longer depend on other members of his family.

In *Abartan* ('Vanishing Line'), he returned to a feminist theme. A vivacious college girl joins the anti-foreigners' movement in Assam but is rebuffed by the society for indulging in racial politics. She plays various roles in a mobile theatre whose hero, a married man with a daughter, woos her. Eventually, she falls in love with a lonely engineer and frees herself from the 'hero', the troupe and her kins to live anew with her new-found man.

Itihaas ('Exploration') deals with the trauma of urbanisation in Assam, still largely agricultural. In a small town, a promoter offers to build a housing estate for the local people. A young family head gives his land and old house to him, as the promoter gives him a job of supervisor in another town. In his absence, the family breaks up under economic pressures.

Kaal Sandhya ('Evening of Death'), produced jointly by the NFDC and Doordarshan, is a denunciation of political terrorism in Assam. A police officer, enquiring into the murder of a university professor, withdraws under pressure of local politicians. He pursues it, nevertheless, on his own and succeeds in changing the mindset of a former terrorist who had killed another intellectual. Financed by a government organisation, the film debunks guerrilla attacks on the intelligentsia by misled young people and seeks to reform them. Dr. Saikia died in 2003 at the age of 71.

Jahnu Barua

Almost every film by Jahnu Barua (born in 1952) has been shown in the Indian Panorama since his debut, *Aparoop*a in 1982. Seven more of his films since qualified for the showcase- *Papori* (1986), *Halodhia Choraye Baodhan Khai* (1987), *Banani* (1989), *Firingoti* (1991), *Khagoroloi Bohu Door* (1995), *Kuhkhal* (1998) and *Pokhi* (1999). Barua graduated in direction from the FTII, Pune in 1974 and worked on various film projects before joining the ISRO to make over 100 educational TV programmes for the SITE. He resigned eventually, to make his first film, *Aparoop*a; a Hindi version, *Apeksha*, featuring Girish Karnad, was financed by the NFDC. A girl gives up study to marry a rich money-lender whose debt her father cannot repay. Scooped in a lush tea garden of upper Assam, she leads a bored and lonely life until a college friend, since become an Army officer, visits and offers her an escape route.

His second film, *Papori* is set in the background of massive student unrest in 1983, demanding boycott of election, imposed by the central government. He had planned to do a documentary on the movement, which took a toll of some five thousand Assamese but as the State government did not permit, he chose to make a feature instead. An ordinary housewife runs her family of husband and a paralysed small daughter. The innocent husband is arrested for a murder and the child dies in a hospital. She is raped by a petty criminal but when she goes to a police station to lodge a FIR, the Inspector refuses to accept a proof of her husband's innocence; in anger, she tears it off. The Inspector is transferred; she gives up the idea of suicide and resolves to fight with the Establishment.

A truer offbeat film- his third- *Halodhiya Choraye Baodhan Khai* ('Yellow Birds Eat Away Grains', 1987) deals with the harm that Machiavellian politics does to common people. A middle-aged farmer lives precariously with his wife and two children on a small piece of land. A rich villager takes it away on the plea that it was mortgaged to him for a loan, taken by his father. He sells oxen to file a suit against the rich villager but as he cannot bribe up and down the line, he loses the case. His son gives up study and works

as a servant in the headman's house. As the villager contests the election for the State Assembly, the opposition tries to use the farmer's lawsuit against him. The farmer is distressed to see in posters the big smile of the rich villager who took away his land. The film was praised for its photography and 'for its affirmation of human dignity' and awarded in Locarno Festival, next year.

More touching is his 1994 film, *Khagoroloi Bohu Door* ('One day you will see the sea') about an old ferryman in a lush north Assam village and an orphaned grandson who lives with him. He goes to the city with the child at the invitation of another son, a government officer, to find, eventually, that he wants his father to sign on a sale deed of a property to acquire another in his wife's name. Angry, he returns to the village to find that a bridge is being built over the river on which he plies his ferry. Fearing that it will deprive him of his livelihood, he tries to furiously demolish the bridge at night with a hammer. The grandson comforts him, saying that the bridge will not last long, as the corrupt contractor must have used sub-standard materials. It fetched Barua the Best Director's national award with the citation praising its 'original format'. His four other films were very well-made with contemporary themes, like rampant deforestation (*Banani*), male chauvinism (*Firingoti*), anti-British struggle (*Kuhkhal*) and 'the power of simplicity' (*Pokhi*).

Barua's 2001 film, *Koniker Ramdhanu* ('Ride on the Rainbow'), featured in 2002 Indian Panorama. A delinquent boy, interned in an asylum, is brought over to the district court in Guwahati for trial for alleged murder of the owner of a motor garage where he used to work. The court remands him to a juvenile home whose incharge, a psychologist woman, tries to help him. She goes to his village home and learns that he is an orphan and left it for city when his foster-parents could not pay his school fees. After many incidents, he confides in the sympathetic warden that he hit the garage-owner with an iron rod after a homosexual attack. He is freed from internment and lives with the warden as his new guardian.

Others

Padam Barua's *Ganga Chilanir Pakhi* (1975) is a political melodrama. A small trader does not let his sister marry the man she loves, because he has supported a rival candidate in a local poll. He forces her to marry another of his choice, who dies tragically, learning of her past affair. It took 10 years to make and is the only film by him. **Atul Bardoloi**, a producer of plays and a cameraman, directed *Aparajeya* in 1970 on the need for communal harmony between native tribals and immigrant Bengalees. His second, *Kallol* ('The Wave', 1978) is about fishermen of Brahmaputra and their exploitation by politicians. *Uttarkal* ('The Future', 1990) by **Abdul Majid**- a prolific film actor- protested against the exploitation of rural people.

Oriya

Offbeat films have been made in small Oriya cinema too, that started with *Sita*

Bibaha in 1934. Spoken Oriya being close to Bengali (people in parts of East Midnapur district speak a variant of Oriya), Bengali films run well in Orissa; not surprisingly, Mrinal Sen made the first Oriya offbeat film. Another film *Malajanha*, made in 1965 by a son-of-the-soil, **Nitai Palit** tended to offbeat, being about the woes of a woman. Neither *Matir Manisha* nor *Malajanha* did well in box-office.

Biplab Roy Chowdhury, Manmohan Mahapatra and Nirad Mahapatra started a truly offbeat genre in Oriya from the late 1970s. In the mid-1980s, Oriya cinema was recharged by the setting up of the Kalinga Studio complex at Cuttack by the Orissa Film Development Corporation. It also offered subsidy to outside producers against actual billing, upto 50 thousand rupees, which was availed by Mrinal Sen and Biplab Roy Chowdhury. This protective State policy and increase in cinema houses helped the rise of a slim 'offbeat wave', to which Nirad and Manmohan Mahapatra were main contributors.

Biplab Roy Chaudhuri

Biplab Roy Chaudhuri, a Bengalee from Kolkata, gave up medical study to be a film editor in 1963. His first film, *Barna Bibarna* (1975) was in Bengali but as he could not release it, he went to Orissa to make an Oriya film, *Chilika Teerey* ('On the Bank of Chilka Lake', 1977) which was adjudged the 'Best Oriya film' of the year. Ray Chaudhuri's next Oriya film came in 1992 but meanwhile, he shot his Hindi *Shodh* (1979) on a Bengali story by Sunil Ganguly, extensively in Orissa, with a telling performance by Om Puri.

In 1993, he made his second Oriya film, *Aranya Rodana* ('A Cry in the Desert'), set in the State's tribal milieu, on a theme similar to Govind Nihalani's *Aakrosh* (1980). A local legislator and his gang rape and kill a young tribal woman; in vengeance, her husband kills the M L A and is jailed. A brave woman journalist goes from Cuttack to investigate the incident, which the local powers, wanting to suppress, obstructs and intimidates her. Her timid chief editor publishes a tame version, fearing reprisal. Her marriage goes on the rock and her cause is defeated but she finds solace in bringing up the child of the tribal couple, as it needed a mother. The film featured in 1994 Indian Panorama in Kolkata.

His third Oriya feature, *Nirbachana* ('Election Campaign', 1994) exposed the murky electoral morals of politicians and party workers in a remote village. Lured by a *zeminder*'s carrot of giving 100 rupees for every vote for him, the village headman keeps a very old tubercular beggar in the courtyard, waiting for the polling day. As his condition worsens, he is taken to a hospital in a basket, hanging from a pole but while passing by a quarry, a dynamite explodes, killing the beggar and nipping their hope for 100 rupees. It got a national award as the 'best film on environment'.

Nirad Mahapatra

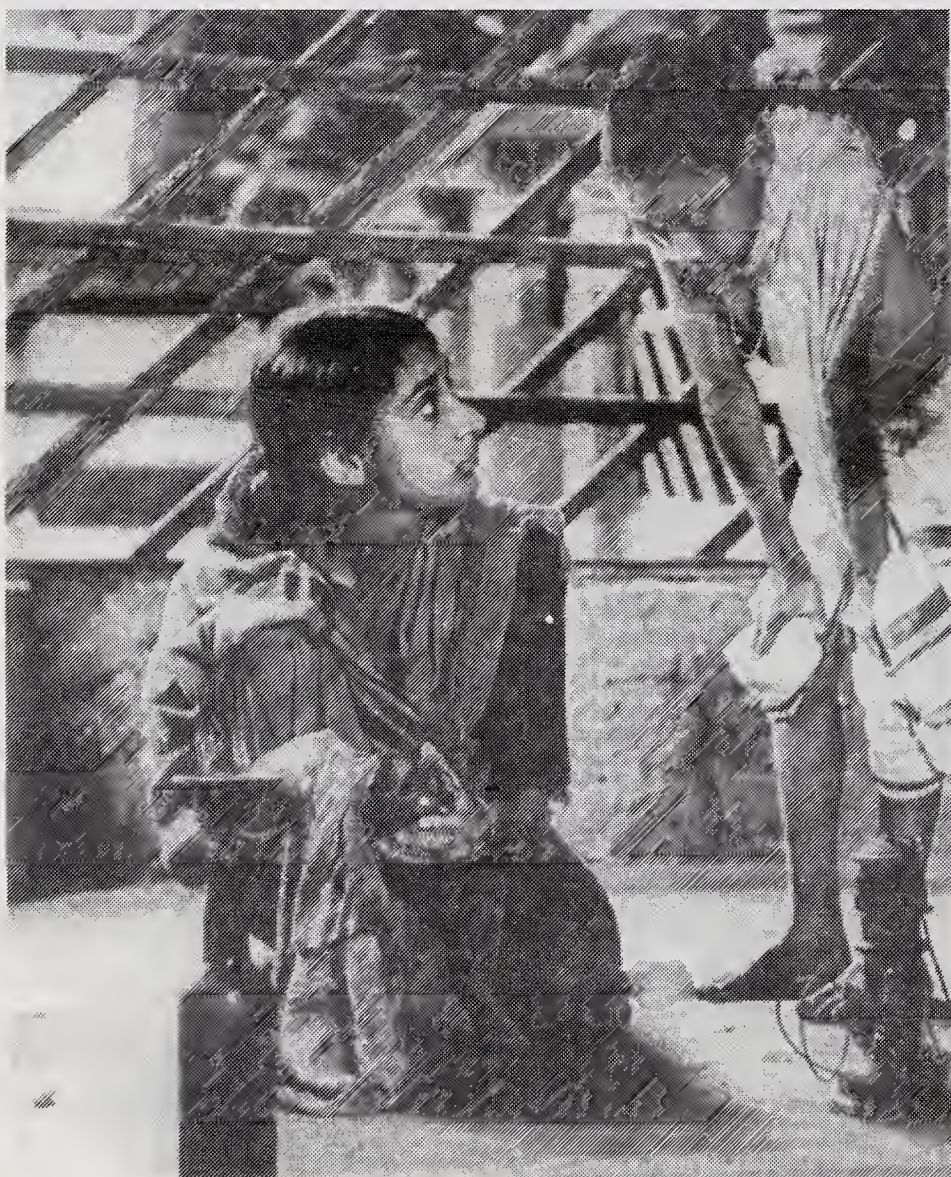
A truer offbeat Oriya film came in 1983 from a young FTII, Pune graduate, Nirad



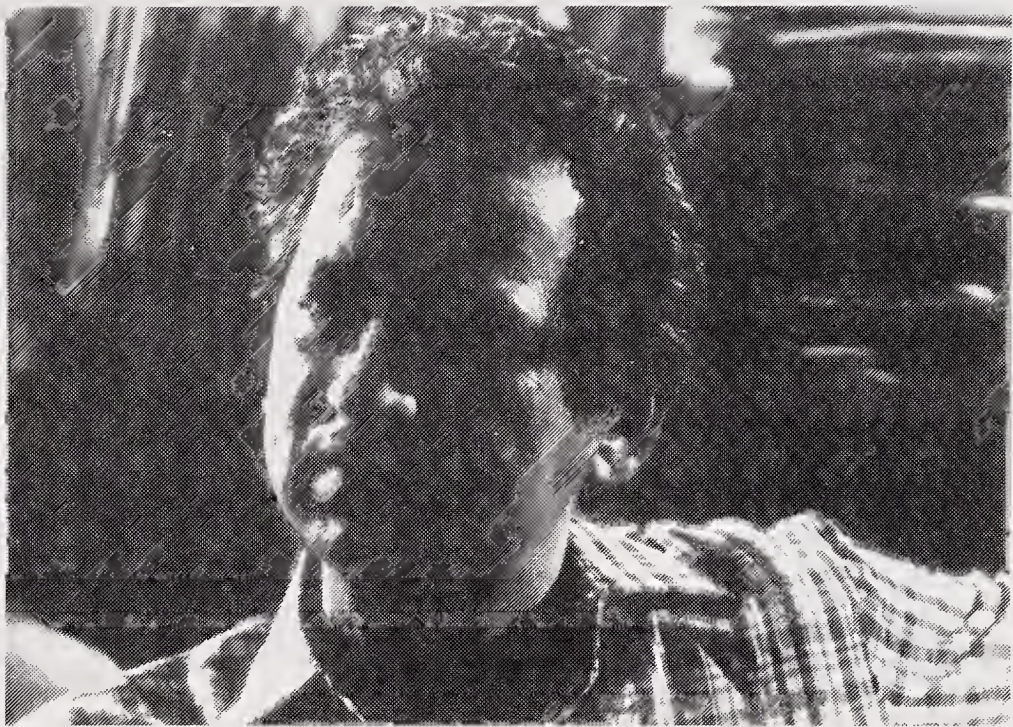
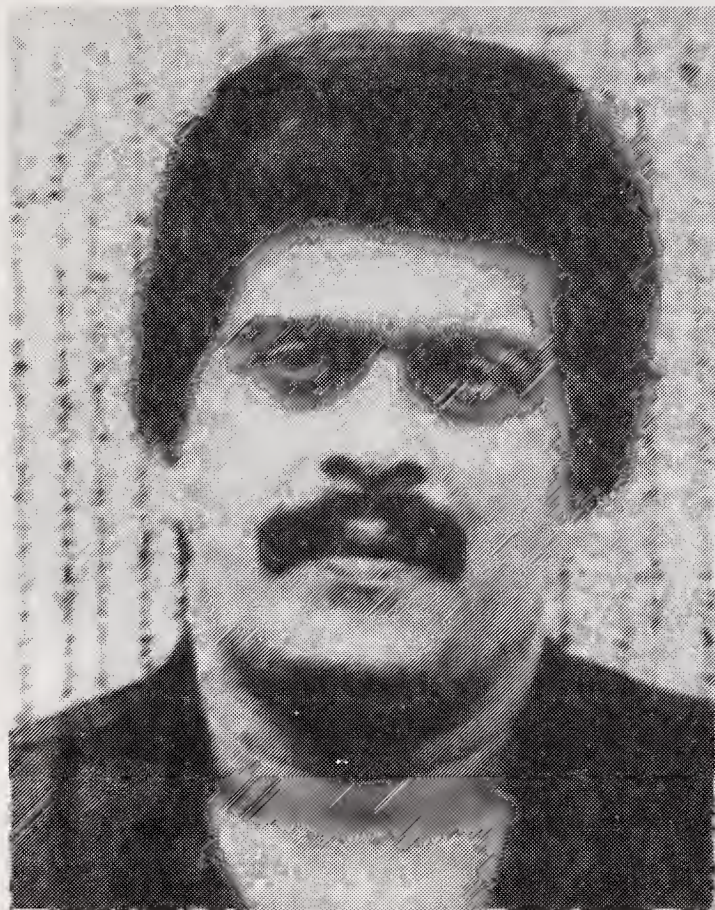
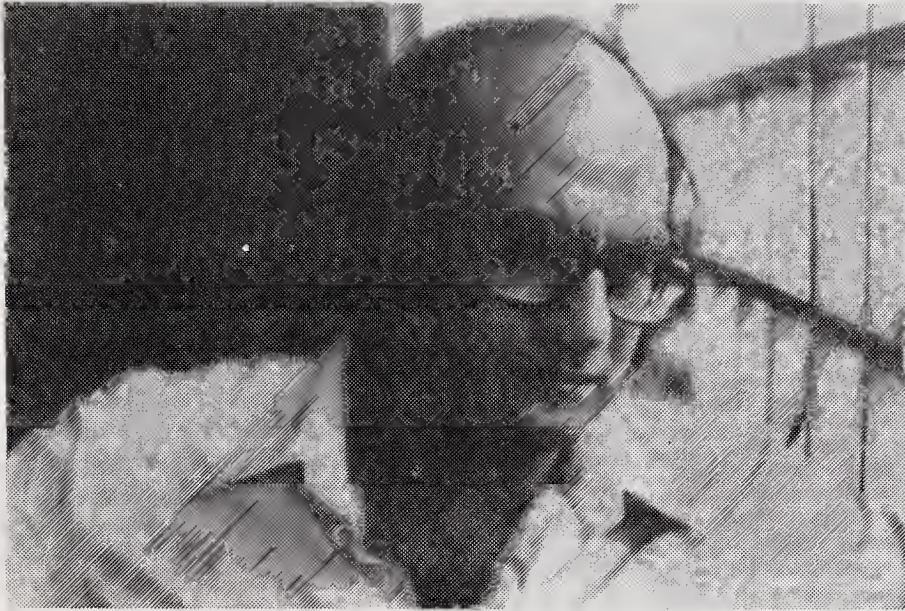
A scene from the leading offbeat film Director Muzaffar Ali's hit film *Umrao Jaan* in Hindi (top) and a still from *Maya Memsaab* (above) in Hindi directed by versatile director Ketan Mehta



A tense moment from the film *Kanneshwara Rama* in Kannada by a pure offbeat film
Director M.S. Sathyu

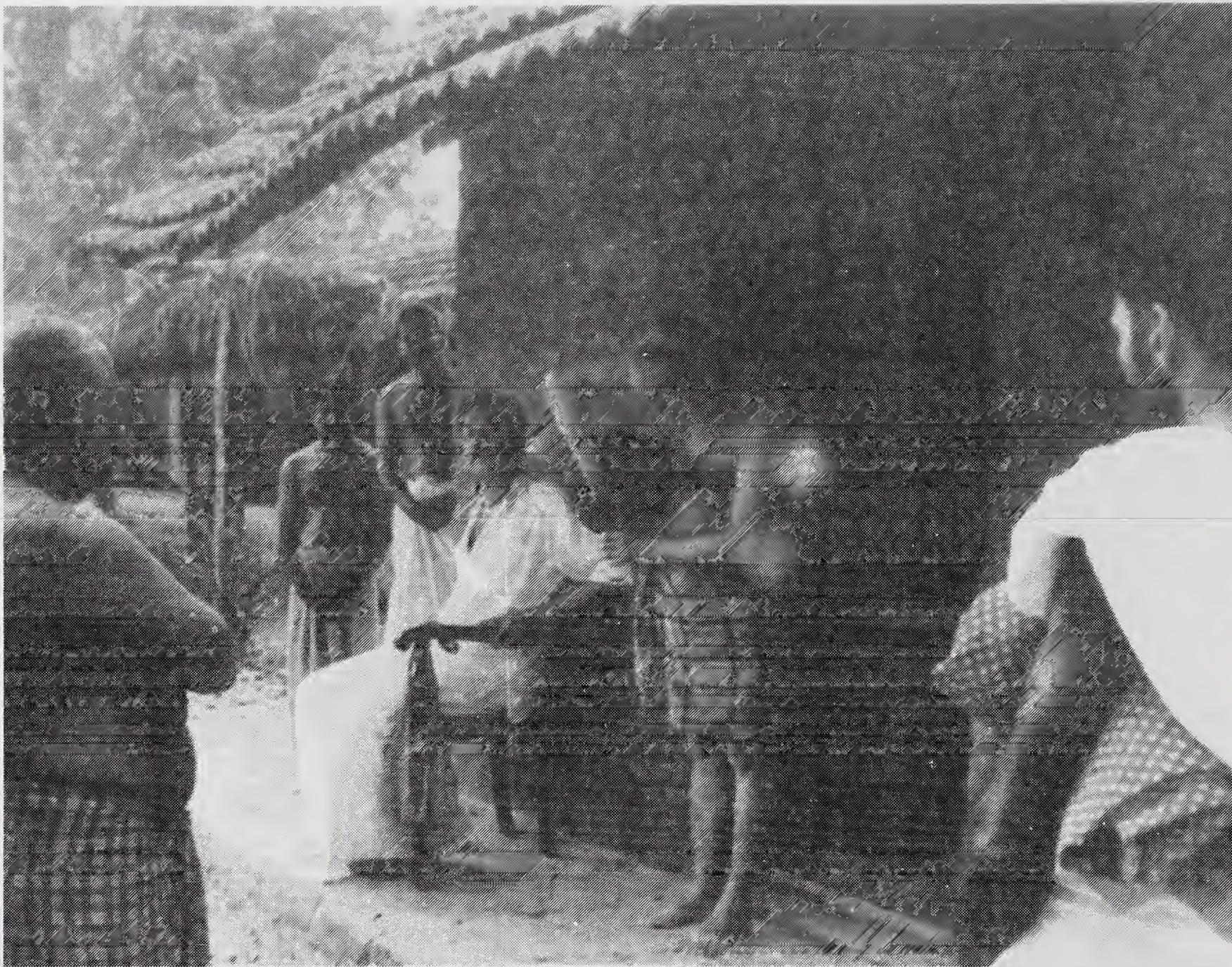


A scene from *Ghatashraddha* in Kannada
directed by one of the topnotch film
Directors of the south Girish Kasaravalli



Seasoned offbeat Filmmakers : (Clockwise from top left)

1. Mani Kaul (Hindi)
2. Aribam Syam Sharma (Manipuri)
3. Kumar Shahani (Hindi)
4. Bhabendra Nath Saikia (Assamese)
5. (Late) Shankar Nag (Kannada)



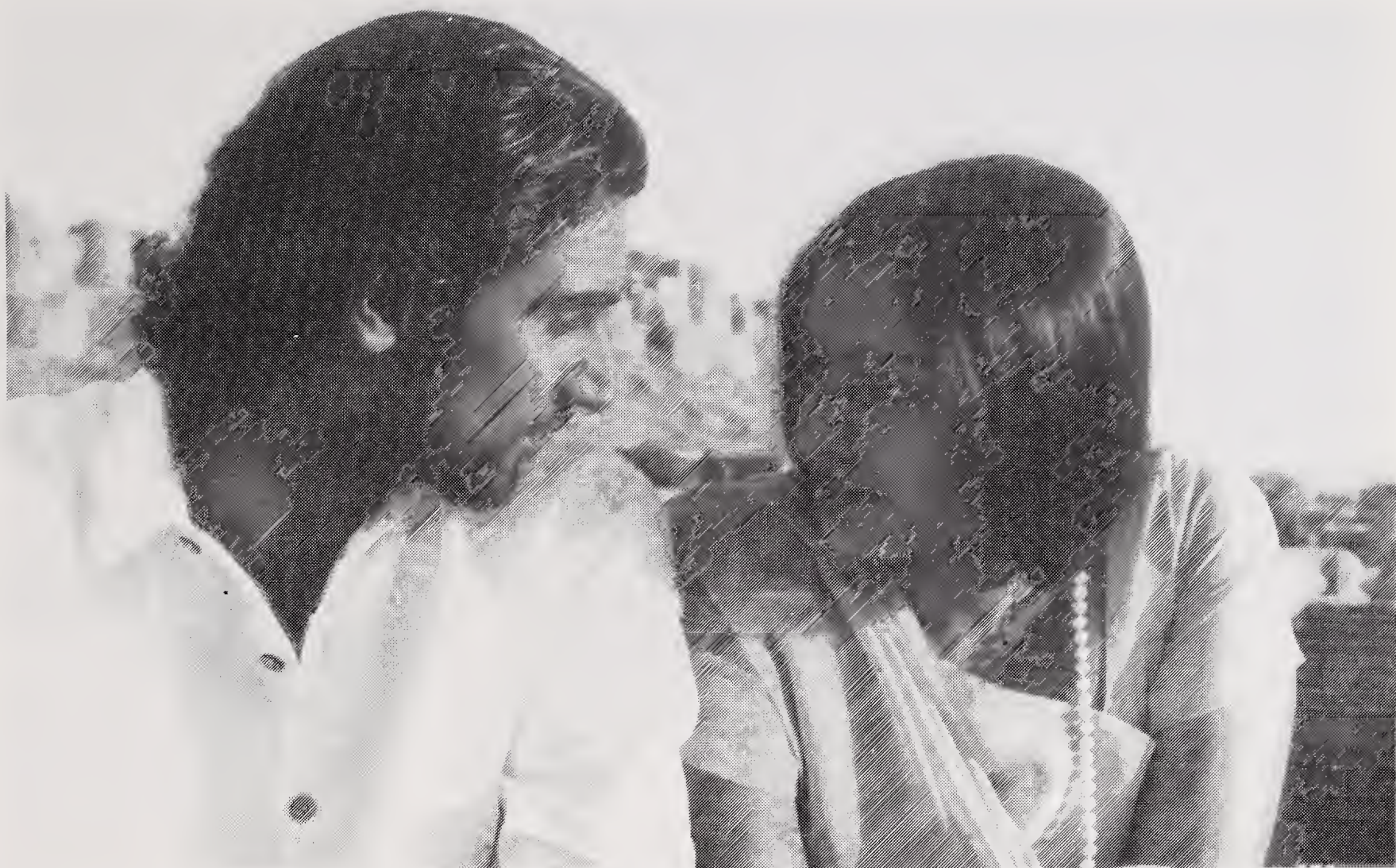
A still from Adoor Gopalakrishnan's *Vidheyan* in Malayalam



A leading film Director from Kerala
G. Aravindan (above)



A scene from *Thaneer Thaneer* in
Tamil directed by K. Balachander



A scene from *Meenaxi : A Tale of Three Cities* by veteran artist and filmmaker M.F. Hussain: new parameters of creativity



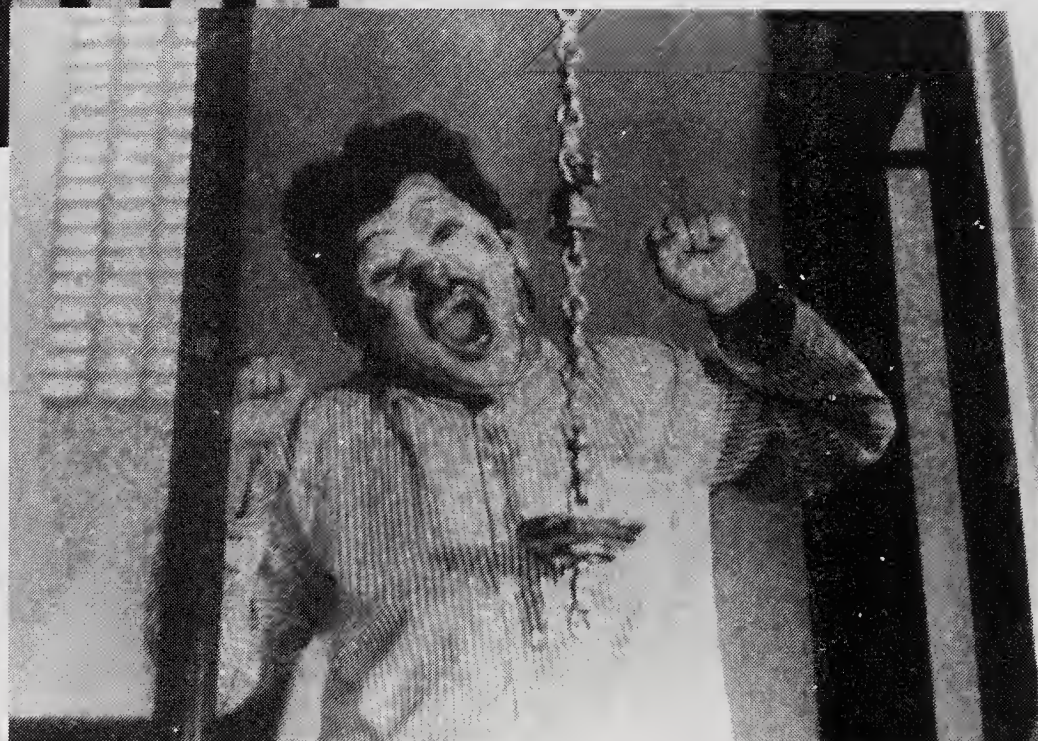
A still from *Bandit Queen* by Shekhar Kapoor: cinematic power at its best



Offbeat films in Assam - *Aabartan* by Bhabendra Nath Saikia (left) and *Halodhia Choraye Baodhan Khai* by Jahnu Barua (below)



Offbeat trend in Orissa: a scene from *Sheeta Rati* directed by Manmohan Mahapatra (left)



Offbeat cinema in Marathi : a still from *Ek Hota Vidushak* by Jabbar Patel (right)



A scene from Bhabendranath Saika's *Itihaas* (Assamese) : portrayal of urbanization in Assam



A scene from *Shaheed-e-Mohabbat Boota Singh* (Punjabi) by Manoj Punj: A new genre in Punjabi cinema



A still from Tamil film *Roja* directed by Mani Rathnam: deft analysis of terrorism in Kashmir



A scene from *Bangarwadi* directed by Amol Palekar: sensitive film set in rural background

Mahapatra. His debut feature, *Maya Miriga* ('The Mirage', 1983), shot in 16 mm in Puri with amateur actors, caused quite a sensation in Indian Panorama, next year. Lavish praise in *Sight & Sound* (Spring, 1984) by *The Guardian* critic, Derek Malcolm made it known internationally. It even received a commendation in 1986 Cannes Festival. Malcolm wrote:

"The great virtue of the film lies in its sense of atmosphere and the director's sympathy with each of his characters. This is the sort of film which looks comparatively unambitious but has an authority and a command of its material that is rare enough anywhere, nowadays".

It is about a modest school teacher who with great self-sacrifice gives his five children higher education. One son qualifies for the Indian Administrative Service and departs; other sons and daughters go their way. The family breaks up under growing economic pressures with he and his old wife left alone, eking out a drab existence. Mahapatra was born in Bhadrak and halfway through his studies in political science in Bhubneswar, went to FTII, Pune to do a course in direction in 1971. In 12 years after that, he made only two shorts and two documentaries for various sponsors on subjects like Chhou dance and *Pat* painting of Orissa. The Japanese director, Yasujiro Ozu influenced Mahapatra, particularly in editing style.

Manmohan Mahapatra

Related to Nirad Mahapatra, Manmohan was born in 1951 and spent his boyhood in Kolkata where he saw many Bengali films. He also took a course in direction from the FTII in 1975. In 18 years since his debut, *Sheeta Rati* (1982), he made 10 more films—*Neerab Jhada* (1984), *Klanta Aparahna* (1985), *Trisandhya & Kuhuri* (both 1986), *Majhi Pahacha* (1987), *Nisidhha Swapna* (1988), *Kichu Smriti Kichu Anubhuti* (1989), *Andha Diganta* (1990), *Agni Veena* (1991) and *Vinya Samaya* (1993).

The first three and *Majhi Pahacha* qualified for Indian Panorama and eight of his films won national awards. *Seeta Rati* ('Winter Night') is about a woman's vain bid to narrow class distance in a hide-bound society in the backdrop of political rivalries. In a remote countryside, a girl falls in love with a young man who is too weak to surmount social pressures and taboos to marry her. In despair, she marries the man, chosen by her parents and returns to teach in the school and live a humdrum life. It won the national award for best Oriya film of the year and was shown in the *Indian Film Fete* at the Pompidou Centre in Paris and at Montreal Film Festival in Canada.

His next, *Neeraba Jhada* ('The Silent Storm', 1984) is about feudal exploitation of peasants who are crushed by loans, taken by mortgaging their small landholdings. One such peasant goes insane while another commits a rape; a third goes to the city to seek a livelihood. His child cheers him, saying, "You will see big buildings and lights of the city but do not forget to bring for me unbreakable marbles". It was Marxist in ethos and warned of a brewing 'silent storm', a revolution against the exploitative forces. It won

two national awards and besides being shown in Pesaro (Italy) and Cork Film Festivals, was included in the 'Festival of India' package in the United States.

Klanta Aparahna ('Tired Afternoon', 1985) is about a retired man, living in an old house with his much older mother who wants to see her grand daughter, a school teacher, married. Proposals come but fizzle out on the demand of dowry. A lover comes to marry her but she does not dare. Both lead lonely lives until the village astrologer comes with another proposal for her. His fourth film, *Majhi Pahacha* ('The March of the Middle', 1987), shown in Indian Panorama, was about a young novelist who takes dowry which he had always denounced, under financial pressures, to marry a girl. This idealistic defeat saddens him and makes him burn his writings. His 1988 film, *Trisandhya* ('Three Divisions of the Day') - a remake of a 1962 film with the same title- is a study of the middle class in Orissa. *Agni Veena* ('Fire Music', 1990), produced by the NFDC, is about the plight of villagers in a remote area, who pawn their meagre belongings to go to cities for work, when life gets tough in the villages.

Others

Prafulla Mohanty's *Magunira Shagada* ('Maguni's Bullock-Cart', 2001) qualified for the Indian Panorama, next year. Maguni, a naïve cart-driver, converses with his cows and transports villagers to fairs and soirees, passengers to and from railway station and even water from ponds. When mini-buses begin to ply, his livelihood is threatened. Villagers tease him to sell the bullocks; he is annoyed. He falls on hard times; his wife dies of untreated illness. Not being able to adjust to changed time, he goes insane and dies, distraught. His bullocks carry his dead body on the idle cart for cremation.

Marathi

Mumbai is the cradle of Indian cinema and of commerce. Although it is not the capital of a Hindi-speaking State and Hindi-speaking people are not a majority in the city or in Maharashtra, Mumbai became the womb of Hindi cinema. The offbeat genre emerged in Marathi cinema also and a new generation came on the scene from the early 1970s to make realistic films, eschewing *Tamasha*, *Lavni* and other folk forms of entertainment, which dominated early Marathi popular cinema.

Few Marathi films qualified for the Indian Panorama, or festivals abroad. *Prapanch* by **Madhukar Pathak** in 1961 was, in a way, a forerunner of the Marathi offbeat. It is about a poor village potter, hard-put to maintain an enlarging family. As a film scribe remarked, "In the yellow years of the Marathi cinema, *Prapanch* will always remain the contemporary pioneer of realism". The Marathi offbeat genre started in the mid-1970s. Notable among its pioneers were a paediatrician, **Dr. Jabbar Patel**, an architect-couple, **Nachiket & Jayoo Patwardhan**, a stage actor **Amol Palekar** and an art teacher, **Ramdas Phutane**. Dr. Jabbar Patel and Amol Palekar switched over to producing Hindi films in the mid-1950s on successful Marathi plays. Both being produced in Mumbai, Hindi and Marathi films have been very interactive. Marathi plays and short stories have provided narratives of Hindi films, e.g. *Ardha Satya* and *Party* by Govind Nihalini and *Holi* by Ketan Mehta.

Dr. Jabbar Patel

Dr. Jabbar Patel (born 1941) studied medicine to become a child specialist but took to the theatre, early in life. He staged, to popular acclaim, Bertold Brecht's *Three-Penny Opera* and Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghasiram Kotwal*; the latter was also staged abroad- in Berlin, London and Paris. He made his first film, *Samna* ('The Confrontation', 1975) at the age of 34 after making a mark in Marathi theatre. His other films to date are *Jait Re Jait* ('The Victory', 1977) *Sinhasan* ('The Throne', 1979), *Umbartha* ('Threshold', 1982) and *Ek Hota Bidushak* ('Once there was a clown!', 1992), *Mukta* ('A Liberated Woman', 1994) and *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar* (1999); all of them were shown in the Indian Panorama.

Based on a screenplay by Vijay Tendulkar, *Samna* is about a conflict between a politician and an apparently crazy school teacher in a small town, played convincingly by Nilu Phule and Shriram Lagoo. Dr. Patel's art and craft improved in his next three films, particularly in *Umbartha*, in which Smita Patil left one of her career-best performance as head of a women's remand home. *Jait re Jait* (1977) depicted a fierce struggle of a Sahyadri hill tribesman. Tendulkar also wrote the script of *Sinhasan*, taking the storyline from two novels by Arun Sadhu. It exposed the goings-on in a council of ministers, identifiably of Maharashtra but the State government, far from obstructing it, allowed it to be shot in some ministers' houses and offices.

Umbartha (1982) is about a young woman who leaves home, spurning her family, to work in a remand home for criminal women. Wife of a progressive lawyer, she is upset by her husband's move to save a rapist from sentence by maligning the raped woman. In the *Mahilashram*, she fights corruption and greed to save remanded women from further exploitation. The trustee board members, benefiting from such corruption, make her life difficult. She resigns and returns home to find that her husband has taken another woman. She leaves home again, resolving to lead her own life. It was an avowedly feminist film, based on an autobiographical novel by Shanta Nisal. Girish Karnad played the lawyer husband and Hridaynath Mangeshkar composed its music. A Hindi version, *Subah* was also made but not to as warm reception.

Ek Hota Vidushak (1992) is about a buffoon in *Tamasha* (burlesque) plays. He is actually an illegitimate son of a danseuse who leaves her troupe to live as mistress of a village landlord. His mimicry, songs, wit and humour make him popular; politicians use him during election meetings to draw crowd. An upcoming cine actress takes him to the city where she, breaking off with a lover, marries him. He excels as a cine comedian and prospers under political patronage but he suspects that the actress, who wedded him in a whim, is still in touch with her jilted lover. One day, his *guru* brings in a little girl, an illegitimate child of a dancer, whom he had once courted. Shocked, he gets the girl admitted in a boarding school. He goes there regularly to entertain her and her schoolmates on weekends but she does not laugh. Engaged for electioneering by a candidate, he amuses the crowd in a meeting with tales, which make the girl smile, because for once, he was not mimicking but telling a simple tale. The crowd hurls stones at him but the girl hugs him, saying; "That was some story, Papa".

His next film, *Mukta* ('A Liberated Woman', 1994) is about conflict between modernity and tradition, illustrated by the life of a high-caste girl who is drawn to a *dalit* ('downtrodden', usually of low caste) and an African-American whom she invites to her home. Dr. Patel maintained that caste barriers are as repugnant as colour and race discrimination in the USA. It also touched on the 'generation gap' issue in India and abroad and examined the ideas that the present generation lives by. Shown in Indian Panorama, next year, it was awarded as 'best film on national integration'.

Dr. Patel's another ambitious and successful film is a biography of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, the great Marathi low-caste barrister, who headed the Constituent Assembly, entrusted with the drafting of India's Constitution and its adoption in 1950. The film was assigned to him by the Government of India for five crore rupees and produced by the NFDC, as he had made a documentary on him for the Films Division in 1988. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar* (1999) is a fruit of elaborate research by him and a script committee, comprising Ambedkar's widow, grandson, Shyam Benegal, some Ambedkarites, *Dalit* leaders and himself. The Malayalam superstar, Mamooty in the title role resembled the great leader. It showed Gandhi in a poor light, as he did not approve Ambedkar's idea of separate electoral rolls of 'untouchables'. Particularly touching is the panoramic scene of the *Deeksha* ceremony on 14 October 1956 at Nagpur, presided over by Dr. Ambedkar (where some 150 thousand *dalits* were converted to Buddhism) and a brief sequence of his meeting with Mahatma Gandhi. The film has been subtitled in Gujarati, Punjabi, Bengali, Oriya, Tamil, Malayalam and Telugu- the first Indian film to be subtitled in so many languages.

Ramdas Phutane

In 1978, an unusual Marathi film was released, directed by Ramdas Phutane who also wrote its story; he was also the producer of Dr. Patel's debut, *Samna*. *Sarvasakshi* ('The Omniscient') was set in the real-life milieu of the sensational *Manvat* murders in Maharashtra and was shot on location. The cast mostly came from the Marathi art theatre, except Smita Patil and Anjali Paigankar. An idealist teacher arrives in a village with his wife and joins a school; in the local society, he comes across belief in blind traditions and irrational practices, persisting through generations. A landlord, his widowed daughter-in-law and a young grandson only understand him. The teacher's wife conceives but has a premonition that the child in the womb, or its mother, would die. She goes to a monk-cum-witch doctor, *Bhagat* to seek his blessings to avert the mishap. He demands a human sacrifice, which horrifies the pregnant wife; she eventually dies during delivery. The teacher is drawn into the power play of *Bhagat* who accuses him of killing a victim. He is imprisoned and while in jail, has a vision of sacrifice of a young boy on a hill. Acting on his tip-off, the police catch *Bhagat* and the headmaster who were actually preparing for the sacrifice; the teacher is set free.

Phutane was an art teacher in a Mumbai college for 12 years and also wrote for newspapers. He penned poems too, which he published in an anthology, *Cutpiece & Other Poems*. He inspired Dr. Jabbar Patel to make *Samna* on a theme, which was at

the heart of Maharashtra politics. Ramdas, a typical Maratha, tall and well-built, wanted to expose small-time politicians thriving on rural cooperatives in *Saamna*. His next film is *Jallos* ('Down with Festivals', 1981), in which he ridicules extortion of money to hold religious festivals but actually to purvey cheap entertainment. *Sarvasakshi*, made by availing the scheme of entertainment tax refund by Maharashtra Government, came at a time when superstitious murders were rocking the State. His third feature, *Survanta* (1994) was about exploitation of sugar-mill workers by the management and corruption among the intelligentsia. For box-office success, he filled his later films with songs.

Amol Palekar

Amol Palekar, born in Mumbai in 1944, took a course in painting in J J School of Art in Bangalore before directing Marathi plays along with Satyadev Dubey and with his own *Aniket* group from 1968 to 1972. He introduced the 'theatre of the absurd' and the Greek Proscenium on Marathi stage, on which he also became a popular actor. Beginning with a charming hero's role in Basu Chatterjee's *Rajanigandha* (1974), he made a mark as an actor in Hindi cinema too, generally in comic roles, a few in Hrishikesh Mukherjee's films, of blundering lovers, before venturing to make them too. Four of the films that he directed (discussed in Chapter XI) were in Hindi- *Ankahee* (1984), *Thodasa Roomani Ho Jayen* (1990), *Daayra* (1996) and *Kairee* (1999). His three Marathi films so far are *Akriet* (1981), *Bangarwadi* (1995) and *Dhyaas Parva* (2000). He also made four features for television- *Kachhi Dhoop* (1987), *Naqab* (1988), *Mriganayani* (1991) and *Paoolkhuna* (1993). Talking of his triple roles in cinema, he often says, "I am an actor by accident, producer by compulsion and director by choice".

Based on the script by Vijay Tendulkar, his directorial debut, *Akriet* ('The Bastard', 1981) harked back to Ramdas Phutane's theme of *Manvat* murders in *Sarvasakshi* but Palekar's is a more horrifying portrait of a village boss, enacted by him. His wife, Chitra played a tribal girl who woos a political racketeer and executes ritual murder of five young virgins to retain his love for her and beget a child by him.

Bangarwadi ('The village has its walls', 1995) is about a young teacher in a backward village of shephards who look upon him as the only link with the world outside. He has to settle disputes, write petitions to authorities and advise them on all matters. A local girl loves him and makes him like the village that he was thinking of deserting. Meanwhile, as a terrible draught sets in, villagers flee and he with them.

Dhyaas Parva ('An Era of Yearning', 2000) is about the Marathi family planning pioneer, Raghunath Dhondo Karve, son of noted social reformer Maharshi Karve, who gave up his academic career of a Mathematics professor to preach virtues of birth control and the need for women's good reproductive health.

His next film, *Anaahat* (2002) is a period piece, set in the Malla kingdom of 10th century. The king, being impotent, is incapable of fathering an heir but is duty-bound to leave one. The queen had accepted his impotency but the all-male Senate declares that she is duty-bound to select a male to impregnate her, as per the custom of *Niyoga*, for

the welfare of the kingdom. The king is in a dilemma but cannot intervene to alter the Senate's decision. Ultimately, she has to consent and discovers her starved sexuality, while the king passes through an emotional turmoil. The Senate members justify their decision but their relations with the royalty alter.

Nachiket & Jayoo Patwardhan

A young Marathi couple, Nachiket and Jayoo Patwardhan (born 1948 and 1949) made two offbeat films. Their first, *22 June 1897* is about Chapekar brothers, members of a secret society, who toward the end of the 19th century, were hanged for assassinating a high British official in Pune. Shot in 16mm but blown up to 35mm, it recreated the prevailing atmosphere of repression and intrigue in plague-ravaged Pune through meticulous sets.

Their next film, *Anantyatra* ('The Return of Godbole', 1985) that featured in Indian Panorama, 1986 is a delightful fantasy. A portly, cheerful, balding middle-aged senior executive of a firm loses interest in home and office, being 'upstaged by a slightly younger and brash colleague', ailing, as it were, from a kind of male menopause. His wife, a socialite, fears that he is going hypochondriac but his doctor finds no disease in him. One day, he receives a mysterious telephone call from one *Jaduwala* who asks him to come to his abode, to get over boredom. He locates the caller in a dingy lane- a scrawny old Parsi- who tells him to pick up any book from his shelf and enter his 'magic cupboard'. He picks up a book on the Peshwas and is transported to their time and milieu of affluence and pretty women, ready to entertain him with music and wine. Next, he picks up Kalidasa's *Abhigyanam Shakuntalam* and lands in sage Kanwa's hermitage where Shakuntala along with her friends frolics with him. She insists on visiting his world and one day, steps into *Jaduwala*'s den, ending the fantasy of the executive and his ennui. The telephone then rings for his bored wife and in a rasping voice, the caller says, "*Jaduwala* speaking, you have need of me".

Their next film is *Limited Manuski* (1997), based on a Marathi story by Shyam Manohar. A person on a moped accidentally drives into the funeral procession of a dead child and displaces the body. Two rustic wrestlers in the procession say, this has wounded the child's soul and resolve to avenge it by giving the man two blows. In fear, the man takes leave from office and hides in his *chawl*, while the wrestlers wait outside. Helpful neighbours offer bribe to them but stick to their resolve. Meanwhile, the child's mother conceives and the wrestlers give up their idea of revenge.

Patwardhans are Pune-based architects; they were art-directors and costume-designers of *Ghasiram Kotwal*, produced by Yukta Film Cooperative of Mani Kaul, Sayeed Akhtar Mirza and two other alumni of FTII, Pune in 1977. They also art-directed S A Mirza's *Mohan Joshi Hazir Ho!*, Girish Karnad's *Ondonondu Kaladalli* and *Utsav* and did principal visual designs for an Indo-Japanese animation film, *Ramayana*. Nachiket attributes the decline in Marathi cinema to lack of teamwork; he told this writer in his Pune flat on 30 March 1994:

“The teamwork that characterized the films of Prabhat is no longer there in Pune; compartmentalized film-making cannot ensure quality. Marathi films are generally family-oriented but these days, entry of formula ingredients of Hindi commercials is destroying that tradition too. *Tamasha* is still alive and popular in Maharashtra villages but nobody in the Marathi cinema has made any film in its format as artistically as Ketan Mehta did with *bhavai* in *Bhavni Bhavai*”.

Others

The NFDC production, *Atyachar* (‘Tyranny’, 1982) by **Bhaskar Chandravarkar** deals candidly with the exploitation of the *Dalits* (backward and low-caste people in central and western India). Based on a *Dalit* writer, Daya Pawar’s autobiography, it is the first Marathi film on the theme. Rajdutt’s *Shaapit* in the mid-1980s is about a bonded labour, forced into a complex marital situation.

Dilip Chitre’s *Godam* (‘The Warehouse’, 1984) is about a girl, Yesu who in her childhood is married to the mentally retarded son of an old man. Her father-in-law rapes her when she grows up; the idiotic son kills him. She flees home and seeks refuge in a godown where the guard would have raped her but for the timely intervention of a daily worker. In shame and desperation, she hangs herself. **Sanjay Surkar**’s *Chaukat Raja* (1991) made it to the Indian Panorama, next year.

Gujarati

Gujarati cinema was even more unaffected by the ‘offbeat wave’ than the Marathi. From the very first, Gujarati films have been dominated by mythologicals and devotionals, with a few ‘socials’ thrown in between, notably **Chandulal Shah**’s *Achhut* in 1940, dealing with untouchability.

The first truly offbeat Gujarati film was *Gunsundari* (1947), based on Chandulal Shah’s script for his Hindi original for Ranjit in 1934. The Gujarati version was directed by **Ratibhai Punatar**, in which young Nirupa Roy played the neglected wife, eventually accomplishing herself to become a companion to her wayward husband. The 1950s also went barren but in the 1960s, some experiments paid off.

Kantilal Rathod

Kantilal Rathod’s *Kanku* (‘Vermillion Mark’, 1969), produced by the Film Finance Corporation and based on a story by Pannalal Patel, is about a virtuous widow who commits a moral lapse and is punished in a hide-bound society. It received the President’s award for best Gujarati film of 1969 and was invited to Chicago Festival, next year, where Pallavi Mehta, playing the widow, got the ‘best actress’ award. Rathod (born in 1924) graduated in fine arts from Chicago, took further course in Calcutta School of Art and for two years from 1954 was an Instructor at Syracuse University, when he worked with Norman MacLaren of Canada. He made documentary films for the Films Division and shorts for the Children’s Film Society and the US Information Service. Gujarat government

refused him a loan for making *Kanku*, citing its script as 'too realistic'. It was acclaimed in home and abroad but Gujaratis did not like it much, which made Rathod turn to produce and direct films in Hindi.

Ketan Mehta

Gujarati cinema after *Kanku* remained 'insensitive' and 'imbecile', as Rathod characterized it, until Ketan Mehta's *Bhavni Bhavai* in 1980. Mehta (born in 1952) studied Economics in St. Stephen College, Delhi where he staged some anti-Establishment short plays for a group, called *Dishantar*. After indulging for a while in 'radical politics' he took a diploma course in direction in FTII, Pune. Mehta formed a film cooperative with some FTII graduates and made his first cinema feature, *Bhavni Bhavai / Andher Nagari* ('A Folk Tale'/'Blind City', 1980) which provoked a similar reaction among the Hindus for harping on untouchability. Like Kantilal Rathod, he made no second Gujarati film but directed several offbeat Hindi films.

Bhavni Bhavai is cast in a dying Gujarati folkplay form, *bhavai* that synthesizes diverse arts into socially relevant communication. Mehta drew inspiration from one such *bhavai* tale, *Achhoot No Bhavai Vesh* ('The Clothes of an Untouchable') by a 14th century Brahmin scholar and musician, Asait Thakore who also wrote a history of the *Bhavai* genre of Gujarati folk plays. Upper-caste people had enforced even dress restrictions on the low-caste untouchables, like tying a broom on the back to erase footprints, donning a third sleeve symbolizing submission, carrying a clay spittoon around the neck and wearing unwoven yarn as a head-dress.

The film's narrative is on two levels of time. In the present, huts of untouchables are burnt but a minstrel peps up their morale with a folk song. Through this song, the film goes into the past to parody a foolish king who had two wives but no issue. His low-caste subjects clean royal toilets but when they go to a wedding, the palace stinks; so they are brought back and beaten to death. The older queen delivers a son, making the younger queen angry. The courtiers, trusted with killing it, set it afloat in a box, which is picked up by a childless Harijan couple. The child grows into a handsome and carefree youth and falls in love with a brave gypsy girl. She makes him discard the humiliating dress of untouchables. They run away but the younger queen identifies the youth. Goaded by the gypsy girl, the youth surrenders.

As in a *bhavai*, the film has two endings- one happy (as in a fairy tale) and the other disturbing, in which he is executed, to everybody's grief. It moves back and forth, between the past and the present, with the same actress in both the versions, as in Kurosawa's *Rashomon*. The story is told through folk songs, mimes and dances. Mehta dedicated his debut to Asait Thakore and Bertold Brecht who imbibed the epic structure from Noh and Kabuki theatres. It was enriched by superb performance of Naseeruddin Shah (king), Smita Patil (gypsy girl), Om Puri (tribal drummer) and Suhasini Mulay (younger queen). It was also acclaimed abroad at Nantes Festival of Three Continents in 1981 and won UNESCO Club Medal, apart from the President's award for the 'best feature film on national integration' and 'best art direction' by Mira Lakhia. Mehta came

to be described by film critic, Iqbal Masud as the ‘wonder kid of the off-Bollywood (offbeat) genre’ and ‘the most talented representative’ of the new generation.

Ketan Mehta made no more Gujarati film, distressed by the box-office failure of *Bhavna Bhawai*. He made four features in Hindi (two of them were super-hits), four documentaries and three short films- two of them for television. All the four features (discussed in Chapter XI) were showcased in the Indian Panorama- *Holi* (1984), *Mirch Masala* (1986), *Maya Memsaab* (1992) and *Sardar* (1994).

Others

Kanti Madia’s *Kashino Deekro* deals with a serious, rather elitist, theme. *Manvini Bhavai* (1993), co-produced and directed by **Upendra Trivedi**, received the national award for best feature film in Gujarati. Based on a novel by the Jnanpeeth Award-winner Pannalal Patel, it is about abiding love between a man and a woman in a north Gujarat village, ravaged by drought. Trivedi, a veteran in Gujarati cinema and stage, acted in more than 100 films and produced some 50 plays; he got the ‘best actor’ award in Gujarat for more than ten times and received the State awards for the best director and scriptwriter for his *Zer to Pidhan Jani Jani*. A renowned public figure, he was awarded *Padmashri* in 1989.

Punjabi

Punjabi cinema, which became precarious after the Partition, flowed in a thin stream with few offbeat exceptions. In 1993, **Ravinder Peepat**, Chief Assistant of Raj Kapoor for six years, made his debut, *Kachehari* (‘The Court’) which sought to expose the weaknesses of the judicial system through the story of a hangman’s son, intent on avenging his father’s terrorist killers during their transfer from one jail to another. He gets his father’s job and coming to know an innocent prisoner, to be hanged, promises to avenge the villain behind his sentence. He resigns after hanging his father’s killers and marries the wife of the prisoner who gives birth to a son after his hanging. The son grows up to be a police officer, comes to know the real story and urges his mother to hand over the villain to law. The mother tries him in her own *kachehari* and hangs him with the same rope with which her husband was hanged, and dies. A graduate from FTII Pune, Peepat directed three Hindi films and produced and directed three others, notably *Waris* (1988), featuring Smita Patil, Amrish Puri and Raj Babbar. *Kachehari* got the national award for best Punjabi film in 1993.

In North-Eastern States

Among the eight north-eastern States, films are made in Assam and Manipur only; in the 1990s, some half a dozen feature films were made in Bodo dialect, spoken in some northern districts of Assam but six other States have practically no film industry. Tripura has a dominant Bengali population which sees films made in Kolkata. Hindi and Hollywood films are popular in Nagaland, Mizoram, Sikkim and Meghalaya where many

people speak English. Many parts of Arunachal Pradesh are inaccessible by road and the mass media are not as ubiquitous as in the plains.

Manipuri

The small Vaishnavite State of Manipur was the land of the *Mahabharata*'s princess Chitrangada who wooed Arjuna during his exile in the forest. In 1972, Karam Manmohan Singh produced the first completed Manipuri feature, *Matangi Manipur* ('Contemporary Manipur') and had it directed by the noted Bengali director, Devaki Kumar Bose. About a dozen Manipuri feature films have since been made and but for very distinctive Aribam Syam Sharma, this fringe northeastern cinema would not have been known outside the north-eastern State.

Aribam Syam Sharma

A S Sharma (born in 1939) studied philosophy in Santiniketan and returning to Imphal, taught at Dhanamanjuri College. He had experience of stage acting and music and therefore, his first brush with cinema was as a composer and actor in *Matangi Manipur*. His first film, *Lamja Parsuram* ('Parshuram, the Orphan') went unnoticed outside Manipur but his next two films- *Shaphabee* (1976) and *Olangthagee Wangmadasoo* ('Even beyond Summer Horizon', 1979) - received national awards for being the first offbeat films in the backward region.

His real breakthrough was his fourth film, *Imagi Ningthem* ('My Son, My Precious', 1981), based on a short story by M K Binodini Devi who wrote stories for his other films too. This remarkable film from an unexpected quarter is about an intelligent young woman who gives up a promising career to teach in a little Manipuri village. There, she befriends a six-year boy in whom she senses an emotional void, following its mother's second marriage and her death during delivery. The boy is made to believe by his grandfather that a leisured woman with a deprave husband is his mother. The woman takes a liking to the boy and adopts him. As he grows up, his grandfather and her estranged husband demand him but neither succeeds, as the bond between them had become inviolable. The film etched A S Sharma on the India's offbeat map. It was shown in New York, Denver, Montreal, London and Hong Kong film festivals and won the Grand Prix in the 1982 Nantes Festival of Three Continents.

Sharma made his next feature, *Paokhum Ama* ('Answer') for the Films Division. It was the first Manipuri film in colour and was entered at Tyneside Festival in the U K. His two more films- *Ishanou* (1990) and *Sagol Sanabi* (1995) – also qualified for the Indian Panorama. *Ishanou* ('The Chosen Woman') is about the young wife of an office worker, who lives a humdrum life with him and two children. Riding on the pillion seat of his bike, she feels dizzy; she also suffers from convulsions. One night, she goes to a woman sorcerer who invokes divine power through colourful dances. Her ailment is not cured but she is said to be divinely possessed. Moving, as it were, in a dream, she is initiated into the sorcerer's sect and feels alienated from her husband who re-marries.

Sagol Sanabi ('The Grey Horse') is about a couple living in a hilly village, whose daughter joins them from Imphal after a divorce. The family survives on the money that breeders pay for hiring their thoroughbred horse, *Sanabi*. One day, a childhood boy friend of the divorced daughter returns to the village and being still fond of her, proposes to marry her. As she refuses, the friend takes away the horse and refuses to return it, unless she agrees. Ultimately, the friend relents without imposing any further condition. Sharma became internationally known for *Imagi Ningthem*. He inspired a number of young Manipuri filmmakers, like K. Ibohal Sharma and M A Singh.

K Ibohal Sharma

K Ibohal Sharma, a still photographer and documentary-maker, produced, shot and directed his debut, *Sambal Wangma* ('Beyond the Barrier', 1993). A tribal girl sees a depressed cousin brother trying to hang himself. She saves him in time but faces the scorn of the society for being in love with him, as it is immoral. They marry and flee to another village and settle there as 'foreigners'. Amidst odds, they rear their son who grows up to be a handsome youth. After many years, they return to their own village, where her son elopes with a cousin sister, repeating his parents' mistake. When his mother dies, villagers do not allow him to do her funeral rites. K I Sharma treated the Manipuri legend about the 'Lily of Seroy hills', which, when uprooted from its natural habitat and transplanted elsewhere, withers away. He made a number of documentaries on the life of ethnic Manipuris like *Maibis* and a series of films for Manipur Kala Akademi on local tourist places

M A Singh

Like A S Sharma, Singh also studied in Santiniketan and after graduating from FTII Pune in 1973 worked for some time in Mumbai. He returned to Imphal to shoot news and short films for television before making his debut feature, *Sanakeithel* ('The Gold Market', 1983), the first Manipuri film in colour. It is about juvenile delinquents in Imphal, treated rather melodramatically.

The next important Manipuri film came from Oken Amakcham, a classical musician and a stage actor. *Khonthang* (1992) is about a blind boy, his sister and a brother looked after by their elder brother and his wife with their limited means. The sister gives up school to earn for the family. The younger brother goes out to study engineering and when the family pins hopes on him, he returns with a rich girl. He goes to live with his wife's parents and takes no interest in his siblings. The sister contracts leukemia and when the estranged brother arrives in the hospital with a shawl it serves as her shroud.

Offbeat in Smaller Cinemas

Out of two Khasi films made, one qualified for the Indian Panorama. *Manik Raitong* ('Manik, the Poor', 1984), on a Khasi legend, *U Hynniew Trep*, meaning 'Seven Huts', was directed by a Bengali, **Ardhendu Bhattacharya**, born in Shillong in 1955 .

Seven of the 16 chosen heavenly families decide to live on earth and in due course, proliferate into the Khasi race. In an ancient Khasi village, young and poor Manik had only a flute, with which he entertained himself and others. His father died, leaving a huge debt. He and his sister work hard to repay the debt to avert being bonded labour to the money-lender. In a village festival, girls, gaily attired, dance to the tunes of Manik's flute; one of them attracts the tribal chief's gaze. He proposes to her parents to marry her and they dare not refuse. Being upset, the girl seeks Manik who advises her to marry the chief. She does so but would not let him touch her. She returns to her parents when her husband goes on a long tour. Manik's flute haunts her and one evening, she goes out in pouring rain to meet him in his solitary cabin. She passes the night with him and conceives. When the chief returns, he finds her a mother; he drags her to his palace and threatens but she does not disclose the name of the baby's father. He parades all villagers for a futile identification by the baby. Manik comes to take his child, confesses everything and offers to expiate his sin. A stake is prepared at dusk and set ablaze; after playing the last tune from his flute, he jumps onto it. As flames leap high, she runs to it and shouting the name of Manik, as her lover, throws herself into the fire.

Dr. Richard Castelino's *Bangar Patler* (1993) in Tulu, the language of Mangalore region in Karnataka, got a national award. It is about class conflicts between a benevolent couple, a farm hand from a backward community and an illicit liquor trader through a series of murky events, culminating in the surrender of the trader to the police and death of the farm hand. To encourage dialect cinema, the President awarded a film in Kodava too, spoken in a part of Karnataka. *Mandhara Pha* (1993), directed by **S R Rajan**, is about the owner of a coffee estate in Coorg and his two sons, one of whom serves a prison term for murder. Coming out a changed man, he looks for his father who had died already. He vows to lead a decent life with his elder brother.

XVI. Feminist and other Themes

“Why should you not give to women their right to win their fortune?”

—Rabindranath Tagore

The first Indian woman to produce, script and direct a film was Fatma Begum, mother of three early cine actresses- Zubeida, Sultana and Shehzadi; the film was *Bulbule Parastan* in 1926. More than any other aspect of filmmaking, acting, singing and dancing which were initially taboos, became women's preserves in cinema and theatre. Once the society began accepting them on the wide screen, a virtual deluge started; a film without a woman is inconceivable. Women have been more at ease in making middle and offbeat, rather than popular, commercial cinema. Notable among women offbeat filmmakers are Aparna Sen in Kolkata, Sai Paranjpe, Vijaya Mehta and Kalpana Lajmi in Mumbai and Prema Karanth in Bangalore. They were attracted to feminist themes but also dealt with other issues and subjects as well.

Aparna Sen

Aparna Sen's reputation as a filmmaker matched, if not surpassed, her fame as a major actress in Bengali cinema after Suchitra Sen whose ineffable beauty- like that of Hollywood's Greta Garbo- bemused an entire generation. Daughter of Chidananda Dasgupta, the noted film writer, Aparna first appeared, to instant popular acclaim, in a tomboy's role in Satyajit Ray's *Samapti* included in *Teen Kanya* (1961).

Her first film to be directed was in English, *36 Chowringhee Lane*, unforgettable for (Shashi Kapoor's wife) Jennifer Kapoor's rendering of a solitary Anglo-Indian teacher who lives in a back lane of Chowringhee in central Kolkata. She cheers up after giving shelter to a boy and a girl in love- her former pupils - who eventually leave her to more intense loneliness after her retirement from the college. She won the President's gold medal for best director and it was adjudged the 'best English film' of the year. It also won the Grand Prix at Manila Film Festival.

She caused more sensation with her second feature, *Paroma* in 1985, an avowedly feminist film, set in a large aristocratic family of Kolkata. A married woman, approaching middle age is a kingpin; she caters to everybody's whims, fancies and needs and carries out numerous other chores, dutifully. A young war photographer visits the family and while taking her photos, seduces her, taking advantage of her emotional void. Companionship leads to secret sexual indulgence, which gets known and causes a scandal. The photographer flees, leaving her to the family's animus and hatred. She tries to commit suicide in the bathroom but is prevented in time. A fall there calls for an

emergency brain surgery, shaving off hair on her head. A psychiatrist advises her to shed the sense of guilt; she retorts that she has none. She takes up a job to be independent. Only her adolescent daughter gives her company and the two women, critical of male chauvinism, try to be self-reliant. *Paroma* shocked the Bengali middle class and accusations of introducing permissiveness raged in Kolkata press for some time.

Two other films by her- *Sati* ('The Chaste Wife', 1989) and *Paromitaar Ek Din* ('One Day of Paromita', 1999) - also made it to the Indian Panorama. *Sati* is a pathetic story of a mute girl, married to a tree and dying with it. Set in the early 19th century, before the British Indian government banned *Sati*- the Hindu practice of burning widows on the pyres of their husbands- an illiterate deaf and dumb orphan girl is brought up in her uncle's family in a village. An astrologer predicts that whosoever she is married to, will die. She is married to a banyan tree in childhood on a school teacher's suggestion that after it died, as per prediction, she could be married to a man. She treats it as a husband, showers affection on it and keeps her things in its nooks and corners; in sunshine and shower, it gives her shelter underneath. The teacher takes advantage of her situation and one day, when she escorts him to his solitary hut, rapes and impregnates her. When it gets known, her uncle's family turns against her. They give her a potion to abort the foetus and keep her in a cowshed. When the family is asleep, a storm blows away the cowshed and terrified, she takes refuge on the tree, which is shattered by a lightning, also killing her. She becomes a different kind of *Sati*.

In her film for Doordarshan, *Picnic* (1991), various characters who had assembled in a picnic, discover and come to terms with hitherto unknown aspects of their relationship. Her 1996 film, *Yuganta* ('The End of an Epoch') deals with growing alienation of married couples in the pursuit of money and career. An advertising executive in Mumbai joins her wife in Orissa where she runs a dancing school. After many episodes of mutual bickering and misunderstandings, they leave for a sea resort on the Bay of Bengal and come to know of various myths of fishermen.

Her next film, *Paromitaar Ek Din* is about a young educated woman who being unable to adjust to her incompatible husband, gets a divorce but retains good relation with an understanding and sympathetic mother-in-law. A spastic son that she begot dies, making the bond with her husband even more fragile. She gets a job in an advertising firm, falls in love with a short filmmaker and eventually marries him. She keeps in touch with the family whose problems multiply. Her friendship with the mother-in-law survives all tragedies and on her deathbed, she finds peace in being looked after by her former daughter-in-law. The film is too morbid but contains one of the best performances by Mrs. Sen in the role of the ageing mother-in-law.

Her 2003 film, *Mr. & Mrs. Iyer*, featuring her daughter Konkana, is about a young Tamil wife's unspoken amour for a Muslim press photographer in the backdrop of Hindu-Muslim riots raging on a part of their bus route from a hill station to a railway station where they take train for Kolkata. There being no male escort of the wife and her baby, a Muslim youth is requested to look after her upto Kolkata. Hindu fanatics board the bus

and force Muslim passengers to alight, by examining them naked. When they come to the Muslim youth, the Tamil woman says, he is Mr. Iyer, i.e., her husband. The armed fanatics spare him but kill other Muslim travellers. Because of raging riots, the bus stops at a place before evening. Police and forest officers escort the couple and keep them in a bungalow where they sleep separately. Next day, they travel to a railway station, from where availing an express train, they reach Kolkata safely and go their ways, exchanging wistful glances. It came for high media praise because of the topical theme and deft treatment, despite its high-decibel, often inappropriate background music and songs. The film got the national award for 'best feature' of 2002; Konkana got the award for the 'best actress' of the year. *Paroma* and *36 Chowringhee Lane* remain her finest films, while she continues to be in the vanguard of women's roles in the offbeat and mainstream of Bengali cinema. She was nominated for 'Cinema Woman of the Year (2004)' at the Whirlpool GR8 Women awards, organised by GR8, a leading television magazine from Mumbai.

Sai Paranjpe

Sai Paranjpe leapt into fame with her debut feature, *Sparsh* ('The Touch') in 1979, followed by her equally popular *Chashme Baddoor* (1981). Born to a Russian mother and a Maharashtrian father in 1936 in Lucknow, she had her education in Australia where her father was India's High Commissioner. Returning to Pune, she became a celebrity in Marathi stage and from 1972 began making films and serials for television, which are now her mainstay. She was Director of the National Centre of films for Children and Young People (N'CYP) - the new name for the Children's Film Society- since 1992 and tried to promote making of more good films for children and the juvenile.

Sparsh is about the director of a blind school, himself blind (Naseeruddin Shah), who works hard to run and improve it. A young widow (Shabana Azmi) with charitable interests gets deeply involved in its activities and falls in love with the handicapped director. They want to marry but the blind director insists on remaining wholly self-reliant; he also suspects that she has pity, not love, for his condition. They want to break off but a good friend intervenes and reconciles them.

Two other films by her also made it to the Indian Panorama- *Katha* ('The Fable', 1982) and *Disha* ('Direction', 1990). *Katha* is about the unscrupulous escapades of a charming young man who causes a lot of pain and harm to an intimate friend before he is finally exposed. *Disha* deals with exodus of drought-hit people from villages to the cities in search of work and livelihood, an over-wrought offbeat theme. Two childhood friends grow up to become daily-wage farm labour in a Maharashtra village. They have some livestock but one is poorer than the other and goes to Mumbai, looking for work. There, he bribes a middleman and stays in a ramshackle dormitory with 40 others like him. The friend, left in the village, runs into a debt for arranging his extravagant wedding to a village beauty (Shabana Azmi), who works in a *beedi* factory to help him repay it. He goes to Mumbai to join the friend and gets a work like his. Unlike his friend, he feels homesick and returning home unannounced, finds that the family has prospered, meanwhile.

Neither his father nor his wife takes kindly to his return. He discovers that his wife has become mistress to the owner of the *beedi* factory in his absence, with connivance of his father who needed money for his cigarettes and medicine. He returns to Mumbai to tell his friend that he would never go home again but the friend says that he will have to, as his brother has struck water in the village after trying for 15 years to end a protracted drought.

Sai's next feature, *Saaz* ('Melody', 1997) was inspired by the rivalry between India's two greatest singing sisters- Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhonsle. Two such sisters in Mumbai sing playback for films; the elder sister who has sung for heroines for 50 years, feels jealous about, and opposes, her younger sister who with her sensuous voice sings for cabaret dancers and vamps.

Kalpana Lajmi

A niece of Guru Dutt, she assisted Shyam Benegal for eight years (1975-'83). With singer-director, Dr. Bhupen Hazarika she jointly produced, but herself directed, her debut, *Ek Pal* ('One Moment', 1986). In a lush tea garden, a shy girl (Shabana Azmi), waiting for her post-graduate results, is wooed in a party by a young man from a well-known Jorhat family. He also meets her parents and courts her in their Shillong home, giving the impression that he wants to marry her. He suddenly announces that he would be going to the USA to study management, implying that the girl could marry someone else. Another young man, son of her father's friend, proposes to marry the heart-broken girl; she marries him with no choice left. Her first conception results in a miscarriage; she does not conceive for another eight years. The husband is a work-alcoholic and has no time for her. He goes abroad on a year's assignment when her first lover returns to kindle the old flame and impregnates her. The husband returns and rejoices to learn about her pregnancy. She gives out the truth but he accepts the situation and welcomes the baby with a new maturity and understanding.

Lajmi made a more popular film, *Rudali* ('The Mourner', 1992) for the NFDC, on a Bengali story by Mahasweta Devi. A low-caste woman (Dimple Kapadia) lives alone in a Rajasthan village. Shocks and disappointments, early in life, have so petrified her that she cannot cry. A landowner, whom she serves as a maidservant, takes gravely ill. Fearing that nobody would cry when he would die, he engages a professional mourner, Rudali who becomes intimate with her and amazes at her inability to cry. However, before she is able to make her weep, Rudali dies herself, while weeping for a dying friend. The tearless woman discovers that Rudali is her long lost mother and as she looks at the dead landlord, she collapses in tears and becomes a true *Rudali* herself.

Her next film, *Darmiyan* ('In Between', 1997) deals with the twilight sex world of eunuchs who along with prostitutes are entering politics, these days. The son of a noted voluptuous singer (whom she presents as her brother) is a eunuch. She envies younger and prettier actresses and gradually descends into a vicious circle of drunkenness, narcotics, gambling and murky sex and is ruined. The eunuch son grows up in her

mother's torrid world, dresses like a woman and lives with other eunuchs until, one day, he is gang-raped by another band of itinerant eunuchs, known as *hijras* in north India.

Her latest film, *Daman* (2000) returned to the theme of oppressed women. The story spreads over seven days of *Durga Puja* in October, in which an upper middle-class woman journeys from oppression to emancipation, like goddess Durga freeing the world from a demon's oppression. The film is produced by the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare under its 'Women Empowerment' programme, which saw several other films, like Benegal's *Hari Bhari* and Amol Palekar's *Kairee*. There was no government interference and none of these films was propagandistic or didactic. She touched on typical feminist issues of neglect of the girl child and husbands' brutal sexual assault of wives, amounting to 'marital rape' and wives' inability to break away from unhappy marriages. Raveena Tandon of Hindi mainstream played the woman and won the national award for 'best actress', which raised a controversy when it was announced in March 2001.

Vijaya Mehta

Vijaya Mehta, a Gujarati, is better known for her contribution to experimental Marathi theatre of the 1960s. Along with Vijay Tendulkar, Shreeram Lagoo and Arvind Deshpande, she founded *Rangayan* in 1960 and introduced Brecht in Marathi theatre. She was associated with major theatre movements in Mumbai and except *Pestonjee*, most of her films are adaptations of her stage plays. She acted in Benegal's *Kalyug* (1981) and Nihalani's *Party* (1984) and before making her film debut in Hindi, *Rao Saheb* (1985) made a telefilm, *Smriti Chitre* for Doordarshan. It was adjudged the best Marathi film of 1983 and alongwith *Rao Saheb* and *Pestonjee* it was showcased in Indian Panorama. She was married to Durga Khote's son, after whose death at 27, she married Farrokh Mehta, an actor on the English amateur stage.

Rao Saheb is about an England-returned eponymous Brahmin advocate who shares his dilapidated aristocratic home with his abnormal elder brother and two widows—one his sister and the other an aunt (*mousi*). He keeps both in the Hindu tradition of celibacy and reclusion with their heads shaven off. Their drab world is enlivened by the arrival, next door, of a young couple. The young wife takes a liking to Rao Saheb (Anupam Kher) who encourages the husband— a municipal clerk— to take her out to theatres. On a stormy night, the abnormal brother runs away and looking for him, the clerk catches pneumonia and dies. His father orders the young widow to tonsure her head but Rao Saheb intervenes. He is attracted to her and the aunt suggests him to marry her. Rao Saheb cannot dare, held back by fear and indecision. The young widow calls a barber to shave off her head while he goes mad, gradually.

Her next, *Pestonjee* (1987) is based on B K Karanjia's story about two Parsee friends of Mumbai; one is an extrovert and the other shy. A match-maker introduces both to a Parsee girl (Shabana Azmi), not letting one to know about the other's acquaintance. Both like her but as the shy man cannot think of marriage, the extrovert friend marries her promptly. The shy friend is transferred out of Mumbai but returning after some time,

finds that the girl has become shrewish and the extrovert friend is in love with a lawyer widow. They pick up a quarrel and part; the shy friend goes out of Mumbai again. Returning after three years, he tries to make up with the extrovert friend who suddenly dies of a heart attack. He learns that they have a son whom they have named after him.

Prema Karanth

Prema Karanth, wife of Kannada stage celebrity, B V Karanth, made her debut feature, *Phaniyamma* in 1982 in Kannada with a loan from the NFDC. Based on a Kannada novel by M K Indira, it is about a Brahmin girl in a village, who becomes a widow at the age of nine when her almost coeval boy-husband dies of snakebite, six months after her marriage. Society imposes widow's conventions on her; she looks spectral with a shaven head and white dress and is confined to a solitary lumber-room. One day, she has a sneak view of a young couple making love and consoles herself that the only man to touch her body is the barber who comes every month to shave her head. Instead of bemoaning her lot, or committing suicide, she listens to, counsels and helps, other women, particularly the pregnant, even from the lower castes- the so-called untouchables. When she reaches 70 years, she revolts against the Brahmin orthodoxy for treating a 16-year old widow as it did her.

Bandh Jharokhe is about a child specialist of Mumbai, who is married to a dull teacher and gives birth to two children. When her mother is on deathbed, she returns to her parents' home in a village. Her husband had not treated her well and she feels guilty about the accidental death of her brother. She remembers her adolescent days, her prayers and worships in a temple, nestling against her mother. This recharges her mind and strength and refreshes her attitude to her husband and her work. Both *Phaniyamma* and *Bandh Jharokhe* are clearly feminist films, conveying that the strength of women in adversities is within themselves, which they only have to tap to fight with a male-dominated world.

Others

Some women moved from before the camera to behind. **Bijoya Jena**, an established actress in Oriya, made *Tara* on esoteric theme. The daughter of a village priest marries a stranger, apparently very wealthy, who practises *tantra*, the Hindu esoteric rituals. From a morally upright social worker, which made her fall for him, he goes astray. Disillusioned, she returns to her parents' home and proclaims that she is goddess Kali. **Gopi Desai**, passing out from National School of Drama, Delhi, leapt to fame with her debut feature for children, *Mujhse Dosti Karoge?* in 1993 on the fantasy world of a poor boy in the Rann of Kutch. After seven years, she made an adult film, *Bas Yaari Rakho* in 2000 which featured in Indian Panorama, next year. Mumbai mainstream actress, **Hema Malini** tried her hand in direction and her debut, *Dil Ashna Hai* (1991) was an essay in the mainstream genre.

XVII. The Third Generation

“Neo-realism wore the world’s physicality as an ornament.”

—Kumar Shahani

Nearly half a century has passed since the making of *Pather Panchali*- the benchmark film in the offbeat genre, released in 1955. Ray, Ghatak and Sen were then in their thirties. The second generation entered the scene in the early 1970s and sustained the ‘offbeat wave’ that rose after Sen’s *Bhuban Shome* in 1969. A third generation entered in the mid-1990s and is still active. Some of them are already established; many of their films are shown in Indian Panorama and win national and even foreign awards. The ‘wave’ has subsided in many regional cinemas, with lesser number of offbeat films being made and released than in the 1970s; their quality has also become uneven.

Hindi

The third generation in Hindi offbeat genre is still young, most of them having made several films. It remains to be seen, whether they will persist in the offbeat genre, or defect to the mainstream, like many of their predecessors, lured by commercial prospects. They may even go to seed and give up filmmaking. Many talented offbeat directors belied their early promises; some stopped filmmaking after making one or two. It is also not easy to persist making offbeat films which generally do not run long. So many people make a living on films that a producer would not back a director if his film would not be seen at home. However, in Hindi offbeat, over half a dozen new talents are worthy of watch- Santosh Sivan, Piyush Jha, Hanslal Mehta, Mahesh Mathai, Pankaj Butalia, Tanvir Ahmed and Khalid Mohamed.

Santosh Sivan

Three of Santosh Sivan’s films made it to the Indian Panorama- *Halo* (1996), *The Terrorist* (1998) and *Malli* (1999) - the last two in Tamil (details in Tamil section below). *Halo* is a 100-minute feature in Hindi for children- about a seven-year girl who looks for her lost puppy, ‘Halo’ on the streets of Mumbai. Her search ends, after some failed attempts, when she finds it in the custody of a spastic child. She does not claim it, as the child’s need for the puppy is greater than her. His *Oru Yatra* (1999) was awarded the FIPRESCI prize at the Hong Kong Festival.

Piyush Jha

Piyush Jha, a maker of advertisement films, has made only one feature, *Chalo*

America ('America, or Bust', 1998) which made to the Indian Panorama, next year. Three college students in a Mumbai suburb dream of going to the USA and constantly think and talk about it. One of them, hailing from a rich family, is knowledgeable and leads two others to many comic situations with his schemes to go to America, all of which fail. He gets a visitor's visa through the efforts of his father who thinks, a visit to the States will cure him of his obsession. He promises two others to bring them over soon but they wait in vain. They see him return one day and hear from him his unpleasant experiences in the USA. While they go homeward dejected, they meet a foreigner and abuse him to vent their frustration. The foreigner says, he is an Australian, at which they change their destination to Australia and make enquiries.

Mahesh Mathai

An advertising executive, Mahesh Mathai's *Bhopal Express* (1999) did not qualify for the Indian Panorama but is, nevertheless, an impressive debut. It is a story of newly-wed couple in the backdrop of the toxic (methyl isocyanate) gas leak from the Union Carbide plant over the State capital in the night of 2nd December 1984, in which some 16 thousand people died and over five lakh people fell ill in India's worst industrial disaster. A low-rung Union Carbide worker, Verma spends an evening in mayhem in a friend's house, as his wife had left for her parents' house; the friend had given up a job in the company to be an auto-rickshaw driver. As the city screams over the massive gas leak, Verma sees a note that she is returning to Bhopal, that night. Verma tries to stop trains coming to Bhopal station, unsuccessfully. His wife arrives safe but the friend dies of toxic inhalation.

Pankaj Butalia

Pankaj Butalia's *Kaarvan* ('Shadows in the Dark', 1999) is about a middle-aged woman of Pakistan who had spent her youth in India in the 1950s and 1960s. She visits the place in India where she had lived in youth on a travel visa but finds it utterly changed. Memories of her stay in India return and overwhelm her- how animus grew between Hindus and Muslims in the area and communal dust clouded human relations and myriad other things. The film contrasts the fortunes of a migrant Hindu family from Lahore and a Muslim family that chose to stay behind in India. It was one of the seven films selected for the International Critics' Week in Venice Festival, 1999. Butalia graduated from Delhi's St. Stephen College and taught Economics for 20 years before making his debut. His aim in cinema is "to look at hidden stories, those that lie buried within a culture".

Hanslal Mehta

Hanslal Mehta's*Jayate!* ('Victory') 1998) is about a petty lawyer who earns his bread as a notary public. A friend tells him of a young widow who had gone into a coma owing to an error during a Caesarian operation. Her sister and brother-in-law, who look after the child, want him to work out an out-of-court settlement with the hospital

which they have charged with bungling the operation. Seeing the comatose widow, the lawyer who had never pleaded in a court, realises that lack of ambition has left his conscience in coma. After a futile battle with the hospital authorities, lawyers and litigants, he gets a nurse as witness, who discloses how the surgeon's negligence caused the coma and how she was forced to change records.

Others

Pune FTII-trained **Tanvir Ahmed**'s Hindi feature, *Su-Raaj* (1987) made it to the Indian Panorama, next year. His debut *Chiruta* in 1980, on bonded labour got a national award. His 1998 film, *Mahatma* is a tirade against politicians who, he alleges, are 'responsible for the evils in the society'. The angry film fantasizes Mahatma Gandhi giving up his creed of non-violence and annihilating 350 'anti-national' elements (most of whom are 'evil' politicians). A social activist, **K P Sasi** made a very bold feature, *Ek Alag Mausam* (2000) on an AIDS victim, questioning the Supreme Court ruling that its victims cannot marry. It focusses on the society's treatment of AIDS victims as 'untouchables', like lepers and exposes the popular ignorance that it is **not** infectious.

A film critic with *The Times of India*, Mumbai, **Khalid Mohamed** made *Fiza* (2000), featuring three Mumbai megastars; it is in the main stream with usual entertainment ingredients but the theme is offbeat. A Muslim girl of Mumbai, Fiza (Karisma Kapoor) whose terrorist brother is missing since the 1993 riots, goes to Rajasthan in search of him. She is able to trace him there and persuades him to return home. Feeling uneasy outside terrorist ambience, he joins a 'laughing and meditation' course to please his mother. When two goons attack the institute, the police arrive and in the shoot-out, the brother is killed. The film coincided with Hrithik Roshan's dramatic rise to fame after performing in *Kahana Pyar Hai* and therefore, had a box office success.

The mainstream director, **Ram Gopal Varma** (of *Daud* and *Rangeela* fame) lent utter realism to a tale of criminalised politics in *Satya* (2000) to make it akin to an offbeat film. A jobless young man (played by Chakravarthy, Telugu 'hero') from the countryside comes to Mumbai where after many ordeals, he is adopted by a group of gangsters, linked to a criminal politician. He falls for a young singer woman (Urmila Matondkar) of a very different milieu, who does not know that he is a brutal killer. Surprisingly, their love is not affected by the truth he conceals from her, constantly fearing that she would come to know his criminal past. He murders his 'boss' during the *Ganesh Chaturthi* immersion and is eventually killed by the police.

Chandni Bar (2001) by **Madhur Bhandarkar** is a daring film on Mumbai's sleazy nightlife, named after an eponymous ladies' bar- one of some 2000 in the city- in whose dimly-lit smoky halls, flowing with liquor, men from all walks of life jostle with the police and criminals from evening. Bit of a soft-porn, it focusses on bar women and dancers and their miseries beneath their masks. The lead bar girl, Mumtaz (Tabu) who entertains in revealing clothes, end up as a waitress when she grows older.

Jagmohan Mundhra made an excellent film, *Bawander* ('Sandstorm', 2001) in Rajasthan about a village housewife, resolving to carry on with women's literacy and fight for their rights, despite a gang rape by some village elders. Nandita Das and Dipti Naval give excellent performance in the roles of the wife and a visiting social worker from a NGO, respectively. Besides having a good commercial run, the film qualified for the Indian Panorama 2002. Mundhra has been making films since 1980 and directed 24 feature films, many of them based on his stories and produced by him.

Among others whose films qualified for the Indian Panorama, 2002 were **Gulbahar Singh** ('The Goal', 1999), **Fareeda Mehta** (*Kali Salwar*, 2000), **Ashutosh Gowrikar** (*Lagaan*, 2001). *Lagaan* on some Kutch villagers' defeating a local British club cricket team, led by the Collector in pre-Independence India, was nominated in the Foreign Film section for Oscar award, raised high media hype in India but failed to win any. Two Hindi films qualified for 2003 Panorama- *Haathi ke Anda* ('Elephant's Egg') by Marathi director, **Arun Khopkar** and *Makdee* ('The Web of the Witch') by **Vishal Bharadwaj**. *Haathi ke Anda* is about emotional bond between an elderly book-seller and a nine-year boy. His debut, *Makdee* is about a haunted house where, neighbours believe, a witch lives and turns visitors into animals. A naughty girl in the village sends his docile sister into the house, where she is turned into a hen. She runs about to retrieve her but nobody believes her tale. Two policemen offer to help but as they do not turn up, she braves into the house, meets the witch and implores her to let off her sister, restoring her human form. The witch agrees, if she would give her 100 hens, which becomes too difficult a target for her.

Bharadwaj's second film, *Maqbool* (2004) is a remote adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, unless so told, 'in a completely diverse time and space'. The film tells a typical crime & punishment tale, featuring a Mafia don, his Man Friday, Maqbool and the don's mistress in love with him.

Rajan Khosa's *Swara Mandala* is about a young Indian classical singer of Delhi, who suddenly loses her voice, traumatised by her mother's death. Help comes from a street urchin whose haunting voice sets her on a journey of self-discovery. **Pankaj Rishi Kumar's** *Kumar Talkies* (1998) is about an old cinema-hall in a small town, Kalpi which has seen better days. It remembers its glorious past when the town's people enjoyed films in its dark interior. The film is made in *Cinema Verite* style through multimedia collages of video, TV and archival images and was praised in the Fribourg Film Festival.

Bengali

In Kolkata, the third generation began entering the offbeat genre from the mid-1990s, when Ray and Ghatak had died and Mrinal Sen had announced the end of his career after *Antareen* (1993). The second generation, represented by Gautam Ghosh, Buddhadev Dasgupta, Utpalendu Chakravorti and Aparna Sen, was in the acme of their careers, each having made multiple films. Ray's death in 1992 had created a vacuum in public imagination about 'art cinema' (popular label for his films) which appeared to have run out of steam. It is at this time that a new generation began entering, comprising

Rituparno Ghosh, Ray's son, Sandip Ray, Raja Mitra, Saikat Bhattacharya, Ashoke Vishwanathan, Malay Bhattacharya, Pinaki Chaudhury, Raja Sen and Bishnu Pal Choudhury.

Rituparno Ghosh

Of considerable promise is young Rituparno Ghosh, son of a short filmmaker, who blazed into glory in 1995 with his first film, *Unishe April* ('19th April'). Misunderstandings develop between a celebrity danseuse of Kolkata and her daughter (who had just finished a degree course in medicine in Delhi), neglected by the mother in pursuit of fame and fortune; they pour out their hearts in a stormy night and reconcile through tears. Three more of his films also qualified for the Indian Panorama- *Dahan* ('Thereafter', 1997), *Asookh* ('Malaise', 1999) and *Bariwali* ('The Landlady', 2000), all very sensitive and full of human empathy.

Dahan is a story of two women- Jhinuk and Romita who were fast friends before marriage, despite different backgrounds and milieu. Jhinuk becomes a school teacher and Romita is married in a well-off family. On her way back from shopping one evening, Romita is molested by five young men outside a Kolkata underground rail station; her husband is beaten up when he protests. Jhinuk, passing by in an auto-rickshaw, hears her cries for help, alights and fights with the culprits who flee in haste. She makes Romita file a FIR in the police station, from where the incident makes screaming headlines in next day's newspapers. From anger and sighs of relief, reactions in two families change. Romita's in-laws tell her not to fuss about it so as to spare the family embarrassing queries but Jhinuk is bent on getting the rapists punished. In the final court hearing, Romita and her husband say, they cannot recognise the culprits, at which the defence counsel shreds Jhinuk's sheets of charges and evidences.

Asookh is about a popular film actress whose long-time lover falls for a younger artiste at the acme of her career. While his infidelity sours her life, her mother falls ill with an undiagnosed disease. These two crises devastate her life and daily chores get on her nerves. Through all these, she loses faith in mankind, from which Rabindranath Tagore's elevating songs and poems resuscitate her.

Bariwali, produced by the mainstream Hindi actor, Anupam Kher has many episodes, occurring in an old mansion, owned and inhabited by a middle-aged spinster, played by Kher's wife, Kiron. She lets it to be used for shooting of a film on a Tagore novel, in which she eventually plays a part. Various other episodes weave in and out of the rather rambling story, dwelling on titbits of a *zemindar* family across three generations and embellished with many songs, ranging from light classical and folk to *Rabindrasangeet*. Lying in cans for over a year, it was eventually released with Hindi sub-titles, in Delhi and Mumbai.

His two more films- *Shubho Muhurat* ('Thereafter', 2002) and *Chokher Bali* ('An Eyesore', 2003) did very well in box-office, the latter making a kind of record. Inspired by an Agatha Christie play, *Shubho Muhurat* is more than a typical Agatha

‘murder mystery’. A former Bengali filmstar returns from the USA to launch her second husband, directing his debut feature film in Kolkata. On the first day of shooting, called *Muhurat*, a journalist girl, living with her widowed aunt, turns up to write about the film. She accompanies the heroine home after the shooting and witnesses her sudden accidental death. While the media is rife with speculations and police is left clueless, a second murder occurs. The rest of the story deals with the denouement.

Chokher Bali is based on an early novel by Rabindranath Tagore, about a young widow’s craving for sex, which a married landlord of Kolkata secretly satisfies. His naïve wife lets her go closer to him but when the affair gets known, she leaves for Varanasi. The widow, Binodini, spurned by the landlord’s mother, flees to her dead husband’s village, from where another lover, the landlord’s friend, takes her to Varanasi. Neither of her lovers is willing to marry her; she takes leave of them and settles in Vrindavana to spend the rest of her life, like thousands of Hindu widows, in contemplation and worship of Lord Krishna. Big media hype was created by Ghosh and the press before its release during the 2003 Durga Puja days in Kolkata and suburbs, because of Miss World, Aishwarya Rai’s rendering of the widow’s role. She did well, although her’s and landlord’s wife’s dialogues were dubbed. Ghosh faced some criticism in the press for deviating from the story but on the whole, the film was praised for its technical finessé, picturesque locales and bold theme.

Anjan Das

Of similar promise is Anjan Das, a NRI since returned and settled in India, whose *Sanjhatir Rupkathara* (‘Fairy Tales of Sanjhati’, 2002) is a remarkable first film (His debut *Sainik*, made in early 1970s was not released.), wrapped in a novel technique. It draws its narrative from a story by a popular Bengali poet, Joy Goswami and has a pronounced fantasy element, lending to some sequences a surrealist character. A young and pretty girl, *Sanjhati* (played unforgettably by Indrani Halder) dotes on his father who, outside office-hours, dabbles in painting Nature in water colours. She is sexually assaulted by a neighbourhood boy and is roused to a woman. An admiring woman, a family friend and a former pupil, secretly loves him and during the absence of her and her mother one evening, seduces him to a sizzling sex. They are caught in the act and heart-broken, the mother dies of a stroke. In disillusion, she flees to Darjeeling where, one day, her father’s ‘mistress’ turns up to report the sad state of her father. She returns home, nursed him back to health and his passion of painting. Das has announced his third film, *Ebong Srikanta*, based on a story by Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, filmed many times, starring Rima Sen (Suchitra Sen’s daughter-in-law), who like Aparna Sen’s daughter, Konkana took to acting in Mumbai films too.

Raja Mitra

Raja Mitra learnt filmmaking under Gautam Ghosh and made a number of documentaries before his debut, *Ekti Jibon* (‘Portrait of a Life’, 1987) on a story by Buddhadev Bose. Bose rewrote a true story of a Sanskrit teacher, Haricharan

Bandyopadhyaya in a village school, who for 20 years compiled, all alone and overcoming odds, the most comprehensive Bengali dictionary. Rabindranath Tagore brought him over to Santiniketan where he completed his monumental lexicon. In the film, he is inspired by a student, rightly contradicting him in a class on the interpretation of a poem by Tagore. He finds little support to his venture from scholars in Kolkata. His son dies in an accident; the Second World War and the Partition land his family in a refugee camp in West Bengal, where his wife dies of cholera. At last, he finds a publisher for his labour of love and is lionised on its publication by the government and literary bodies. On his deathbed, he dreams of a new generation, using his dictionary.

Mitra's second feature, *Nayantara* (1995) is about an eponymous stage actress, grown old and earning her livelihood from doing bit roles in films and plays, secured by a well-wisher friend from her heydays. She was married to an alcoholic stage manager; after his death, a helpful co-actor proposes her to join a new theatre venture. She contracts cancer and in spite of best possible treatment arranged by his son, running an audio-cassette shop. While she approaches death, she admits and apologises to him that he was not born of wedlock.

Ashoke Viswanathan

A Pune FTII alumnus, Ashoke Viswanathan made three films until 2002, all of which made it to the Indian Panorama. His debut, *Shunya Theke Suru* ('Return to Zero', 1993) is set in the late 1960s when extremist violence rocked West Bengal. It is about a college teacher, who joins the Naxalite (extremist) movement, faces police brutality and jail. Coming out 10 years later, he wanders aimlessly till an old friend shelters him in his house. Creature comforts breed ennui that after a while drives him back to work for the so-called 'Revolution'.

Kichhu Sanlap Kichhu Pralaap ('Dialogue & Delirium', 1998) is set in a familiar rendezvous of Kolkata intelligentsia- a coffee house- where they indulge in *adda*, i.e. rambling talks for hours. At a table, a narrator describes some regular visitors, whose lives are shown in flashbacks, beginning with a loafer who decides to start a business. Through a skein of meetings, events and misunderstandings with his boy and girl friends, he returns to his table in the coffee house and they indulge in *adda* again.

Not a believer in the importance of 'linear narrative' in a film, he returned to it in *Swapner Sandhaney* (1999). A jobless young man, wandering in a city, sees a politician dying in an accident. A police officer suspects it to be a political murder and cross-examines him but he cannot reconstruct the incident, coherently. A journalist also interviews him but his version varies. He tells the officer about his dream of changing the world with the help of some men and women- his 'dream friends'. As the police officer collects evidence of rivals killing the politician, he disappears. The Police Commissioner refuses to accept the officer's version, as the key witness disappears. While driving aimlessly, the officer meets a 'dream friend' in a village, who introduces him to other co-workers for a Revolution, making him believe that the disappeared youth

will return. He believes that a narrative is not important for a feature film. "It really is quite perplexing that cinema which today is certainly not in its infancy, has to still depend on crutches like literature, theatre and painting", he argued in a Kolkata daily in 1994.

Saikat Bhattacharya

Saikat Bhattacharya studied documentary filmmaking in Germany before actually making them after return to Kolkata. His 1978 debut feature, *Avatar* ('Incarnation'), made in neo-realist style that he absorbed abroad, was not much noticed. The second, *Dulia* (1982) made it to the Indian Panorama. A young tribal woman lives with her family in a remote village, where practically no health care is available. She takes her ailing child to a faraway dispensary but it dies owing to doctors' negligence and malnutrition. A journalist reports its death, which leads to his sacking by the chief editor who does not want to annoy health authorities. His next film, *Arohi* ('Ascendent', 1997), financed by the NFDC, is about a Hindu tree-feller and his wife, who convert to Christianity, lured by offer of regular work by the missionaries. This sets agog the village rumour-mill which, combined with harsh criticism and religious differences, hasten his death. She learns a lesson from this cruel episode and resolves to get away from all religious dogmas.

Malay Bhattacharya

His debut, *Kahini* ('Fiction', 1996), shown in Indian Panorama, uses, what he calls, 'de-constructed narration'. A middle class man, a painter and a taxi driver chloroform and kidnap a Kolkata child and drive him to the countryside. An angry crowd, surrounding a murderer, stops their vehicle. In a house they put up for the night, the family-head speaks of his search for a miraculous remedy for his spasmophilic boy. These disparate events mellow the kidnappers, one of whom wants to return to Kolkata but meanwhile, the abducted child dies.

Shatarupa Sanyal

While an assistant to Utpalendu Chakraborty, Shatarupa Sanyal won the 'Best Lyricist' award for songs she wrote for his *Chhandaneer* (1989). Her maiden feature, *Anu* (1998) which qualified for Indian Panorama, is avowedly a feminist film, exposing the hypocrisy of a revolutionary who preaches gender equality. While he goes to jail, she teaches in a school, faraway from Kolkata. When he is set free after eight years in jail as a political prisoner, she goes to Kolkata to receive him outside jail gate. While travelling together in a taxi, she asks him to apply vermilion on her forehead, meaning that he accepts her as his wife. They live as married couple in her place of work. One day, he discovers some scar marks on her bosom, which she admits, were left by rapists, eight years ago, when he was in jail. The discovery affects his mind and secretly, he consults a psychiatrist. While thus puzzled by his change of mood, she comes across his diary in

which he wrote that he despised her body, as it was not of a virgin. She asks him to leave her house, because the man she knew eight years ago has changed.

Others

Among other talents in the third generation in Kolkata, **Raja Sen**, **Ujjal Chatterjee**, **Bishnu Pal Choudhury**, **Pinaki Choudhury** and **Subrata Sen** deserve mention. None of their films qualified for the Indian Panorama but *Swapno Niye* ('About Dreams' 1999) by Pal Choudhury and *Sanghaat* ('Conflict', 1996) by Pinaki Choudhury are made in offbeat tradition.

Swapno Niye, on a story by S S Gulzar, is about a young danseuse who gives up dancing after her lover dies in a car collision, while coming to see her performance. She goes to Mandu (Madhya Pradesh) to write a book amid ruins and meets the man who had killed her lover in the collision. Filled with remorse, he admits his guilt and falls in love with her. As the shocked woman hurries down the stairs, she falls with shoes tripping and goes blind.

Sanghaat won the national award for 'best Bengali feature' in 1997. A young woman loves a neighbour but her parents marry her to another who dies after six months. She returns to her parents and gets a part-time job in a school, which local politicians would not let become permanent. She does well in school plays, gets into a renowned theatre group and is acclaimed for her performance in a role. When fortune begins to smile on her, her father dies and she loses a leg in an accident. The play's director takes another woman to play her role. In protest, some actors break away and start another group, keeping her in the forefront. Three men express their love for her- the neighbour, a school colleague and a theatre activist but she does not reciprocate.

FTII, Pune alumni, **Anindita Sarbadhikari's** *Barkha* was nominated for the 'Student Oscar' in three categories and she herself was asked by the renowned Polish director, Zanussi to be his assistant. She is to make a documentary on neo-Nazism which, she believes, is emerging in some parts of Germany, with a Bengali version, *Saat Samudra Tero Nadir Paar*. Raja Sen's *Aatmiya Swajan* (1999) and Ujjal Chatterjee's *Gondi* (1991) missed Indian Panorama but though morbid, are good essays in offbeat genre. Subrata Sen's debut, *Ek Je Achhe Kanya* went well in Kolkata because of Aparna Sen's daughter (by Mukul Sharma), Konkana played a Lolita-like role. His next, *Neel Nirjane*, the first digital film in Bengali was not as much a box-office success but treated an offbeat theme.

Oriya

With Nirad Mahapatra ceasing to make any feature film after his internationally acclaimed *Maya Miriga* (1983), the Oriya offbeat genre was left to Biplab Roy Choudhury and Manmohan Mahapatra. To these makers of the second generation joined three younger men from the third- Susant Mishra, A K Bir and Bijoy Ketan Mishra.

Susanta Misra

After graduating from the FTII, Pune Susanta Misra worked in the National Film Archives for two years before making his debut, *Indradhanura Chhai* ('Shadows of the Rainbow') on a shoe-string budget of 13 lakh rupees in 1993. It is about three lonely women- an infirm widow, her young niece and her friend. The widow is approaching old age; the niece, also a widow, is wooed by a teacher and her friend cannot bear presence of men. Surprisingly rejected for the Indian Panorama, it was a 'Special Mention' in 1994 National Awards. Mishra sent it in a video cassette to the Cannes Festival Selection Committee which scheduled it for the *Un Certain Regard* section and entered it for the *Camera d'Or* or 'Golden Camera' prize. It was awarded the Grand Prix with cash prize of \$20,000 in Sochi International Film Festival and was cited 'for poetic conciseness and preciseness of cinematic language'.

His next film, *Biswaprakash* ('The Young Rebel', 1999) which made it for next year's Indian Panorama, is about a 20-year old young man who angers devotees by diving into a Brahmins' sacred pool in Puri and roams in the holy town in his motorbike. He goes to the beach to unwind, where he befriends a young lady trying to convert their old house into a tourist lodge; a debauch policeman wrecks their romance. He gets to know a lot of foreign tourists, including a girl who joins him to witness orgiastic religious celebrations in Puri. As her holidays come to an end, they part but he disjoints at return to routine life.

A K Bir

Graduating from the FTII, Pune in cinematography in 1969, A K Bir wielded camera for a number of offbeat films. Like Nitin Bose, Govind Nihalani and Shaji N Karun, long years in cinematography with major directors gave him knowledge and confidence to make his debut feature, *Adi Mimansa* (1991), also produced and photographed by him. *Adi Mimansa* ('A Rare Solution') got a series of awards- national, State and private (All-India Aravindan Award) and was featured in Bangalore (1992) and Tokyo Festivals. At the far end of a village, in a dilapidated house, live a Brahmin and a low-caste poet's family; the Brahmin is a hardheaded businessman. They live happily until one day, an old Brahmin woman, insane and a gossip-monger, tells the Brahmin's wife that a common pipe carried water for the bath of non-Brahmin children. This sows discord between the families who stop talking to each other. While the adults are thus divided on caste feelings, children reconcile them by their wisdom.

His second film, *Lavanya Preeti* ('Loving Hearts', 1993) is about juvenile romantic love between a boy and a girl in a developed Oriya village; it ends in a tragedy, as the girl dies of a misunderstanding. It was produced by the National Centre of Films for Children and Young People (N'CYP) and awarded as the 'best children's film of the year. Critically acclaimed, it was shown in Berlin Festival and received the Jury's Award for best film. The child actor was awarded at the International Children's Film Festival at Udaipur, all in 1994.

Bir made his third film, *Aaranyaka* ('An Excursion into the Forest', 1994) in Hindi.

In the mid-1940s, an aristocratic widower, fond of hunting, lives at the edge of a forest in his ancestral house and is close only to a young tribal hunter and marksman. He invites two city-dwelling couples to stay in his estate- a businessman and an officer- with their wives, the officer's wife is British. In an idyllic setting, they are attracted to one another until, one day, the English woman accuses the tribal hunter of raping her, although he was absent that day and she was asleep. The turmoil turns into horror when they discover that the grilled meat they ate is actually that of the hunter who was killed by an inebriated group who took his life for his imaginary crime.

Bir's 1997 film, *Shesha Drishti* ('The Last Vision') is his most mature, shot in the lush countryside of Orissa. A guileless young man is attached to his widower father who had been crippled by injuries, received during the freedom struggle. He goes to a small town to apply for a job in a public library and stays with an alcoholic *zemindar*. Even though he fares very badly in the interview, he is selected for the job. Joining, he comes across evidence of rampant embezzlement of funds in the library. Bizarre and murky things happen in the family, beyond his understanding- like a manager getting the inebriated landlord sign a sale deed of the house, his son trying to rape the landlord's slightly mentally retarded daughter. Summoned by a telegram, he returns home to find his father dying. He discloses that he had bribed British officials, selling his dead wife's jewellery, to get him the job. Next morning, the dying father asks the son to take him to the local riverbed, dress himself in a *dhoti* and a sword to execute a sacred martial art, in which he himself was initiated when he was a child. As he breathes his last, the son carries him on his shoulder to the funeral pyre and lights it, as per the Hindu custom. It featured in the Indian Panorama, 1998 and got the national award for best Oriya film for 1997. It was invited to film festivals in Cairo and Singapore, besides participation in Kerala International.

In 1999, he returned to make another children's film, *Nandan*, named after a 12-year adventurous boy, craving for a fancy toy car. Written and produced by him for the National Centre of Films for Children & Young People (the new name of Children's Film Society), the film illustrates, "how market forces rule and affect our daily life". Another film for children, *Baaja*, also for the N'CYP, is about an 11-year boy who snatches a mouth organ from another in the neighbourhood. One day, while delivering shoes to a person in a high-rise apartment at the instance of his cobbler uncle, he finds a thief scaling a balcony. He rushes to see an injured old woman, raises alarm and fetches a doctor. He also chases and catches the thief, recovers the stolen necklace and returns it to the old woman.

Bijoy Ketan Mishra

A journalist and a social worker, Bijoy Ketan Mishra's very first feature, *Ahalya* ("What the silence said!", 1998) qualified for the Indian Panorama. It is about an 'infinitely suffering' woman, like the eponymous cursed woman of the *Ramayana*. An infant girl loses her father soon after birth. Growing up, she marries but even before the marriage is consummated, her husband dies. Priests find in her serial tragedies sinfulness

and prescribe a tough regimen for atonement. Barred from sensory pleasures, she becomes a virtual maid in her husband's house. Of the two men in the family who treat her with affection and sympathy, she looks upon the younger, as if he is her son. Other women in the house, however, make her live a life of servitude, as befitting Hindu widows. Slowly, she is resigned to her fate and surrenders to the vagaries of the elements. Like Ahalya of the *Ramayana* who was petrified by a curse, she finds salvation in death. Based on a story by Lakshmipriya Acharya, the film has many haunting images. The widow does not speak a single word but is eloquent through other sounds, recorded by Namita Nayak.

Assamese

Assamese offbeat cinema was represented and dominated for a long time by Dr. Bhabendra Nath Saikia and Jahnua Barua. A handful of offbeat filmmakers in Guwahati emphasised 'regional specificity'. In a news conference during the 27th IFFI in New Delhi, filmmakers from north-eastern States demanded a kind of 'cultural exception' from the Central government in view of the hegemony of Hindi mainstream cinema in the region. Apart from the elders of the second generation, **Santwana Bordoloi**, **Bidyut Chakravorti** and **Sanjeev Hazorika** of the new generation made films of 'regional specificity' to contribute to the thin stream of Assamese offbeat cinema.

Santwana Bordoloi

After making two short films for Doordarshan, Guwahati and a documentary on AIDS, Santwana Bordoloi, a doctor, made her maiden feature, *Adajya* ('The Flight', 1996) on the plight of three widows- a recurrent theme in India's offbeat genre. In the 1940s in a part of Assam, where Brahmin widows were consigned to hard joyless life, a sect's head has three widows in his family. His younger sister, returning after her husband's death, pines to go to Varanasi to perform her husband's last rites. She loses her jewellery that she was planning to sell to muster money for a Varanasi tour. The widow of the younger brother looks after the property and tenants through a trusted servant. The youngest widow, a daughter of the house, believes, widows should decide where and how to live. She is attracted to a young British researcher on her family's sect but faces opposition. In disgust, she says if she cannot decide where and how to live, she will decide where and how to die.

Sanjeev Hazorika

Sanjeev Hazorika's debut, *Haladhar* ('The Yeoman', 1992), showcased in next year's Indian Panorama, won him the Indira Gandhi award for the 'Best First Film of a Director' in 1992. It is about fracas in a rural family over a stolen plough, underlining the conflict between a heartless lender and borrower, a favourite offbeat theme since silent *Savkari Pash* ('Indian Shylock', 1925). His second film, *Meemansha* ('The Verdict', 1994), shown in 1995 Indian Panorama, deals with a married woman's problems after a

rich villager kills her husband, leading to severe unrest. Hazorika was an assistant director to Pulak Gogoi (for *Sendur*, 1984) and Dr. B N Saikia for most of their films.

Bidyut Chakravorti

Bidyut Chakravarty who acted in a number of Assamese films, made his first feature, *Rag Birag* ('Vacation for a Sanyasi', 1996), which figured in the Indian Panorama. A young man shocks his relatives by announcing that he will become an ascetic, renouncing the family. A daughter of divorced parents, who lives with her mother, loves him but fails to talk him out of his resolve. She meets a Swamiji of an *ashram*, who before becoming a monk was her lover's uncle, 15 years ago. On her persuasion, the *Swami* meets his nephew to dissuade him from becoming an ascetic, tells him of the beauties and merits of non-ascetic life. He falls prey to her charms and shocks her by admitting his lust for her. The *Swami*'s mother dies and he goes for a period for penance for his libidinous desires. Another nephew of the *Swami*- a man of the world- runs a restaurant; in him, Pari finds hope for the future.

Marathi

Offbeat cinema did not much lure the third generation in Marathi cinema, which remained stifled by its proximity to the Hindi mainstream. Only three films qualified for the Indian Panorama since the mid-1990s- Arun Khopkar's *Katha Doan Ganpatraonchi* (1996), *Doghi* (1995) by Sumitra Bhavé and *Astitva* (2000) by Mahesh Manjrekar.

Arun Khopkar

Most promising in the new generation is Arun Khopkar, a polyglot, a specialist in Russian literature, a writer on film aesthetics and an author of a book on Guru Dutt. He did the director's course in FTII, Pune and Smita Patil made her debut appearance in his diploma film, *Teevra Madhyam* ('F Sharp', 1974). He made 20 short features before making his first full-length film, *Katha Doan Ganpatraonchi* ('The Tale of two *Ganapatras*', 1996), adapted from a story by Russian novelist, Gogol. It featured in next year's Indian Panorama. Two ageing bachelors but long-time friends quarrel, as one of them refuses to part with an ancient sword from his family's heirloom. The whole village sets out to reconcile them but at the last minute, because of an unfortunate word, spoken by one of them, they fall apart again. It turned out to be a parable, blending verbal and visual wit, mixing real with surreal and songs with slapstick. (His 2002 film, *Haathi ka Anda* in Hindi is discussed in Hindi section.)

Sumitra Bhavé

Sociologist Sumitra Bhavé's *Doghi* ('Two Women', 1995) which made it to the Indian Panorama, is about two sisters of a poor farmer. The parents borrow money to give the elder in marriage but the groom suddenly dies in an accident. Soon afterward, the father is paralysed by a stroke. These misfortunes make her mentally unsound; she

is sent to the city to her brother. She sends money to her parents to help them give her sister in marriage to an educated young man. Parents suspect that she is earning through prostitution and think, her presence in the wedding ceremony may not be auspicious. Eventually, the suspicion is cleared and both sisters are happily reconciled.

Mahesh Manjrekar

Mahesh Manjrekar began as a stage actor in 1984 and performed in TV serials in the 1980s and 1990s till he made his debut in cinema with *Aai*. He has made three more feature films so far- *Nidaan* (1998), *Vaastav* (1999) and *Astitva* (2001). *Aai*, acclaimed and awarded by *Filmfare*, put him in Marathi offbeat tradition. *Vaastav* is a humane look at the life of a gangster, who, he pleads, also has a conscience. *Nidaan* is a brave film, dealing with the courage and defiance of a girl, infected by AIDS through blood transfusion. *Astitva* which qualified for Indian Panorama is an utterly feminist film about a woman passing through stages enjoined by the society. She wants to find her true existence (*astitva*) in the face of society's wrath and opposition. Manjrekar avoids crudity and vulgarity in dealing with sequences, like the woman's plea for sexual choice, by relying more on dialogue than visuals.

English

Though not an Indian language, English, a British colonial legacy, is widely spoken in India; it has become the link language among the educated. Expectedly, the number of feature films in English is on the rise; their quality is also high, like that of creative writings of Indians in English. Apart from Aparna Sen (*36 Chowringhee Lane*, 1981), other promising makers of offbeat films in English are Pamela Rooks, Dev Benegal, Nagesh Kukunoor, Shekhar Kammula, Vishal Bhandari and Prakash Belawadi.

Pamela Rooks

Two of Pamela Rooks' films were showcased in the Indian Panorama- *Miss Beatty's Children* (1992) and *Train to Pakistan* (1997). She was born in Kolkata in 1958 and after marriage to Conrad Rooks (of *Siddhartha* fame), travelled and worked with him on several projects.

Miss Beatty's Children is based on her own story about an idealistic young English missionary, Jane Beatty who arrives in Tamil Nadu after a teaching stint in a Sri Lankan school. She gets to work with another foreign woman, Mabel Forster who tries to save young girls from being sold to temples for becoming *Devadasis*, i.e., 'maids to gods' but actually to be mistresses to priests. Mabel angers the head *Devadasi* in a local temple by buying such girls and educating them in the mission school. During Mabel's absence, one day, a half-British girl is about to be sold to a temple by her aunt. Jane tricks her to give her the child but as the mob threatens to burn the mission, she flees to Ooty, where she resumes teaching and rears up a little girl as a surrogate mother. She adopts two more Indian children, which debar her from entering, on a Christmas day, a British club. She



Meaningful offbeat trend in Gujarati cinema started with Ketan Mehta's *Bhavni Bhavai* (left) and Manipuri film *Imagi Ningtham* (below) by Aribam Syam Sharma heralded the arrival of offbeat trend in Manipur



A scene from *Adi Shankaracharya* (above) in Sanskrit by G.V. Iyer: new trend in biographical films ; a scene from *Elippathayam* (right) marking a new trend in meaningful Malayalam offbeat cinema

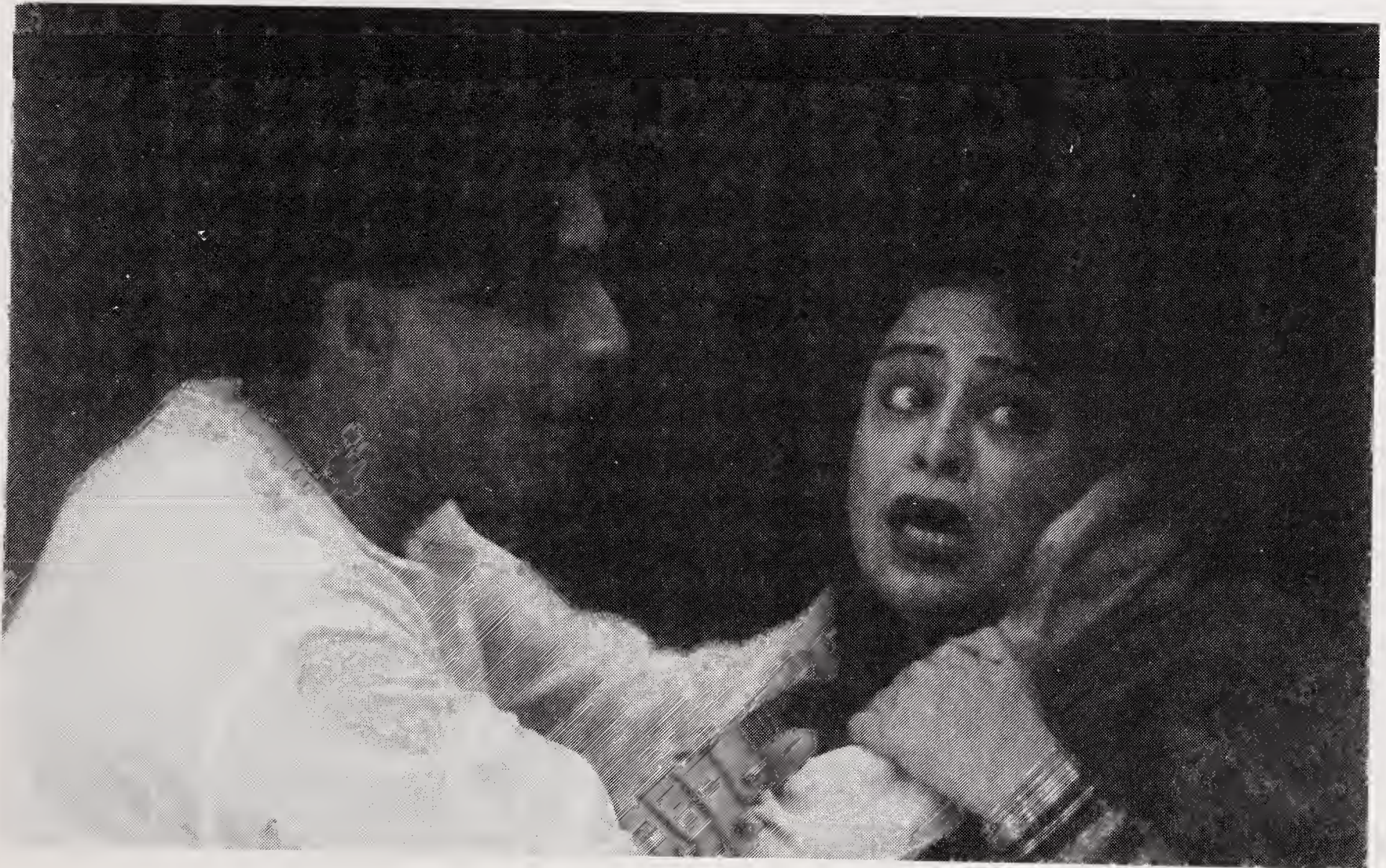


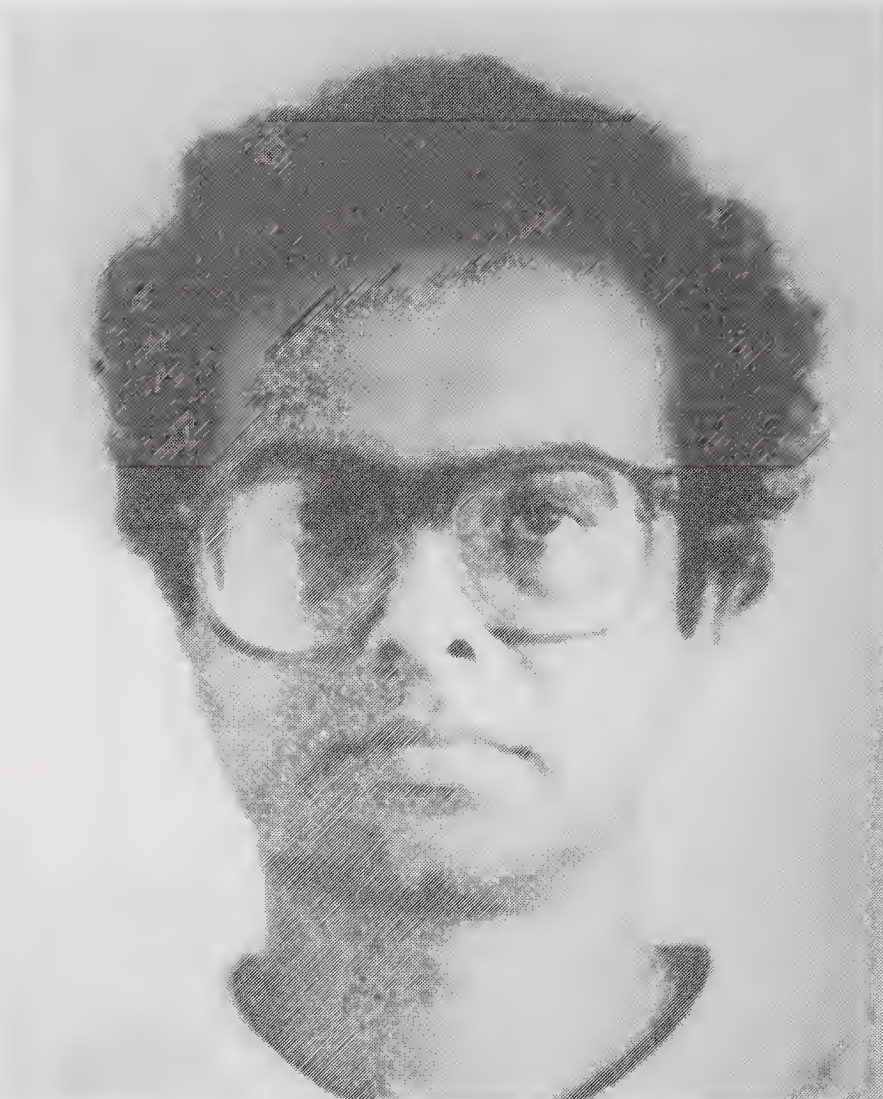


A scene from 36 Chowringhee lane directed by Aparna Sen: well versed with language of cinema



A still from *Rudali* (above) and *Darymiyan* (below) directed by Kalpana Lajmi: committed to highlight social issues



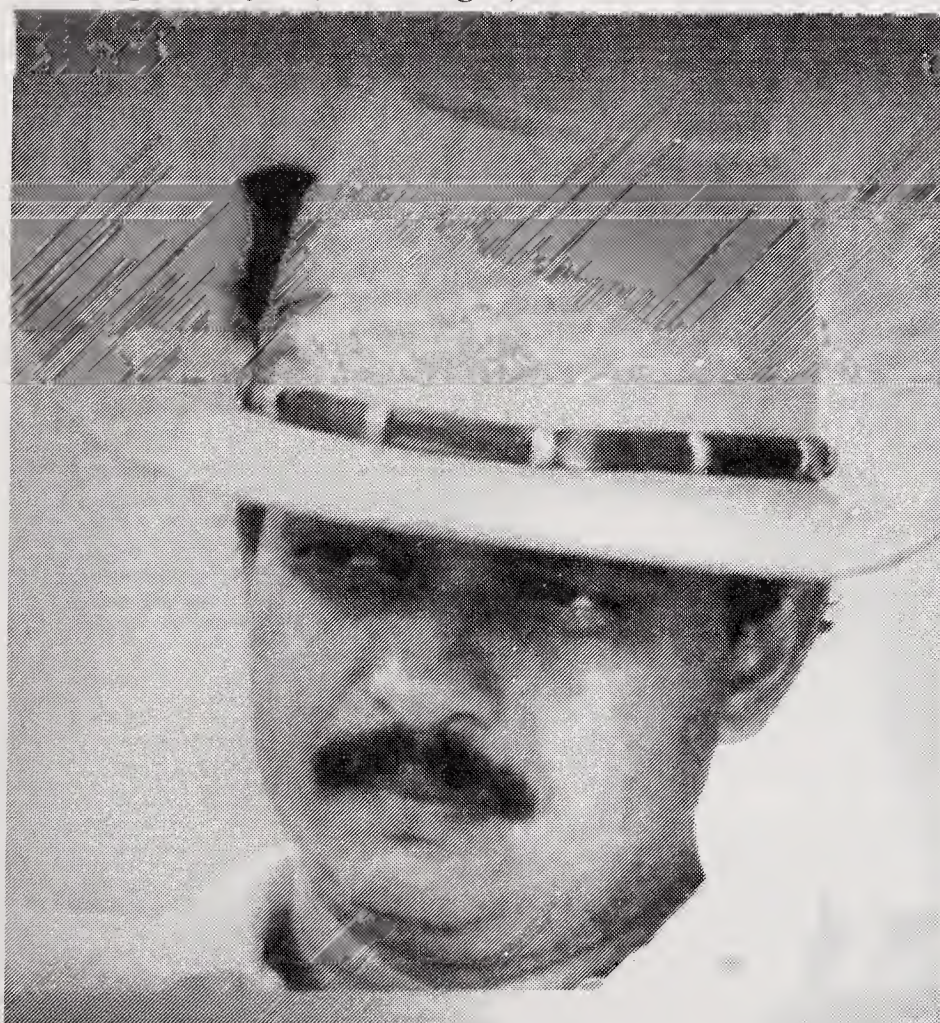


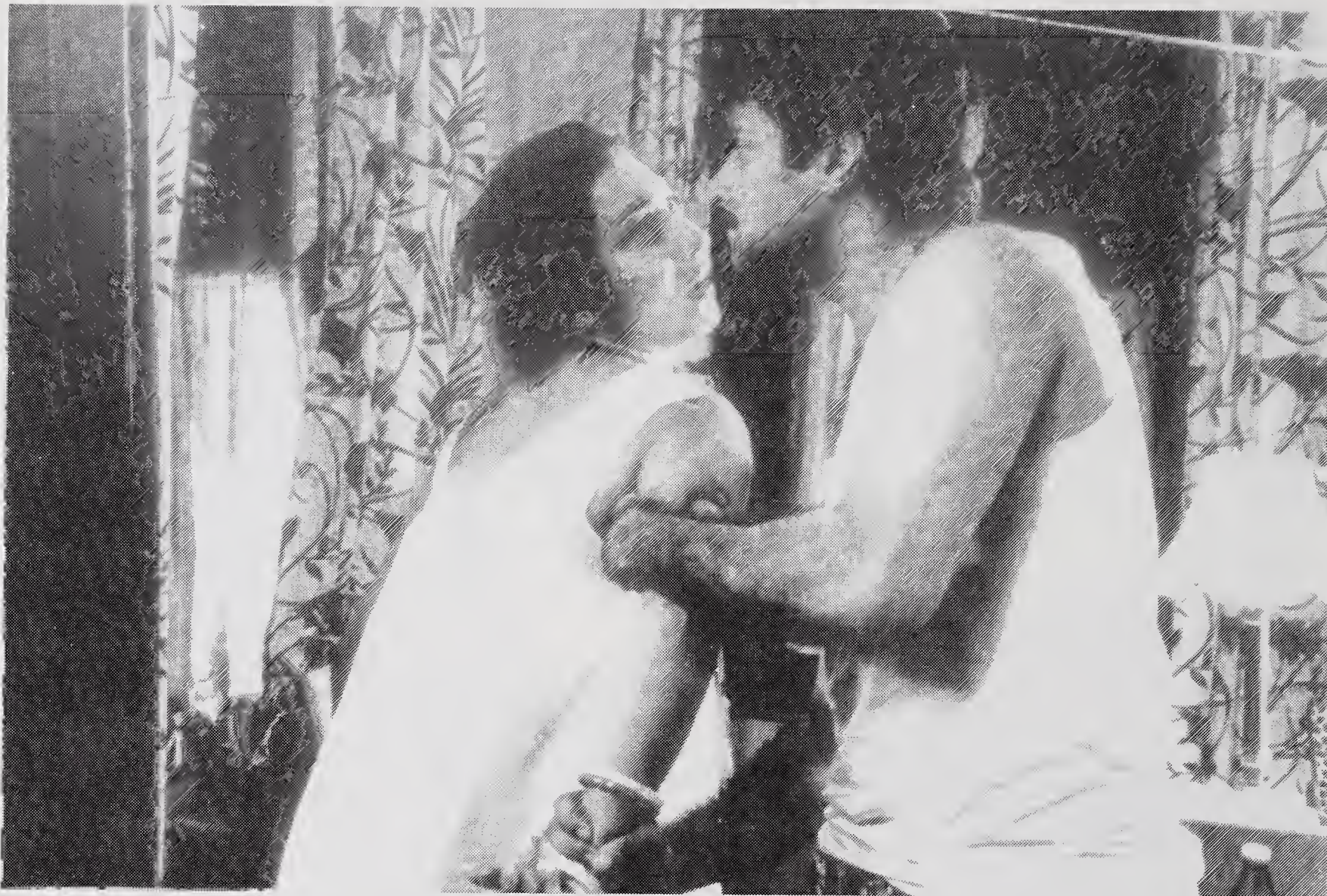
Third generation of offbeat film Directors :Santosh Sivan (above left); Rituparno Ghosh (above right); Raja Sen (below left); Pamela Rooks (below right)





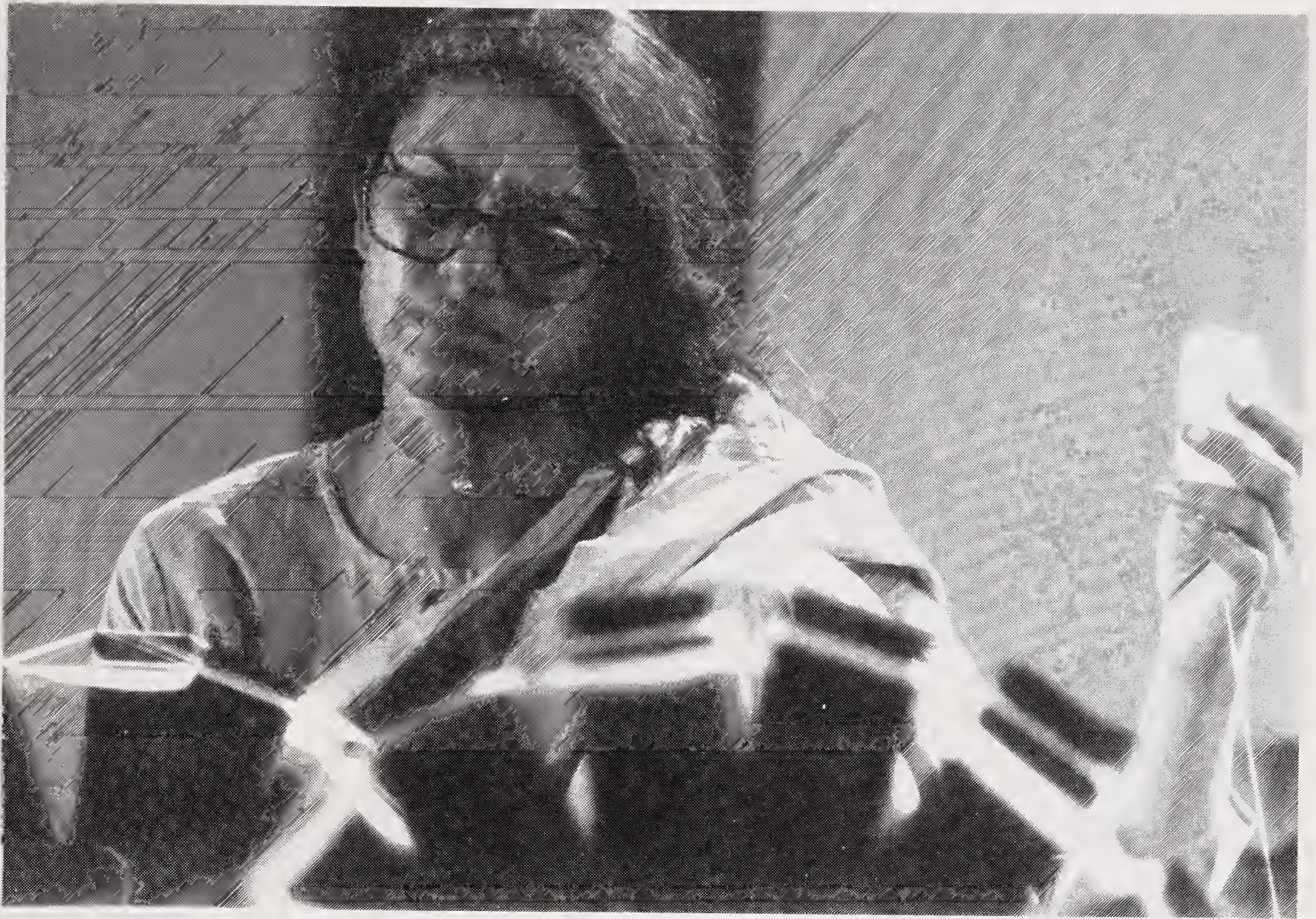
Third generation of offbeat film Directors :Santwana Bordoloi (above)Jayaraj (below left)
Shatrupa Sanyal (below right)





Offbeat films made by Third generation Directors :*Dahan* (Bengali) by Rituparno Ghosh (above)
Shesha Drishti (Oriya) by A.K. Bir (below)





Offbeat films made by Third generation Directors : *Agnisakshi* (Malayalam) by Shyama Prasad (above)
Uttaran (Bengali) by Sandip Ray (below)





A scene from *Chalo America* (Hindi) directed by Piyush Jha: promising new horizons



A scene from Sumitra Bhavé's *Doghi* (Marathi): social analysis on celluloid

snaps her ties with her community and tries to become more Indian. A bandit wants her to adopt his son; she agrees if he would surrender to the police. She falls in love with an American doctor after assisting him in delivery. He goes to Kohima at the outbreak of the Second World War, where he dies during Japanese attack. While India prepares for freedom and her family members plan to leave India, she decides to stay with her children. Jointly produced by NFDC, Doordarshan and A V Rooks, the film's cast, except Pratima Bedi were all foreigners; the photography, music and editing were by Indians. It got the national award for the Best First Film of a Director and for Best Cinematography in 1993.

Train to Pakistan took its story from Khuswant Singh's eponymous novel about the Sikh carnage across the border in early 1947, shortly before India and Pakistan became free from British colonial rule. The Partition does not mean much to a village where Sikhs and Muslims have been living amicably. Suddenly, a local moneylender is murdered and suspicion falls on a Sikh gangster who, out of jail, was having a secret affair with a Muslim girl. One day, a train halts at the village station, filled with dead bodies of Sikhs; another such train also arrives after some days. The village is divided over conflicting loyalties and violence spreads. The gangster comes to save many Muslims from the wrath of his community, bent on avenging the killing of Sikhs whose bodies had arrived by train.

Dev Benegal

Dev Benegal's debut, *English August* (1995), based on an award-winning eponymous novel by Upamanyu Chatterjee, made it to the Indian Panorama, next year. Before assisting Shyam Benegal (his uncle), he studied cinema in New York University and returning to Bangalore, made several documentaries. *English August* is about a young, bachelor Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer in his first probationary posting in a hot and dusty small town in Maharashtra after training in the Lal Bahadur Shastri Academy of Administration in Mussorie. Like the original novel, the film turned out to be satirical with fine characterization of bureaucrats and the public. His smoking, drinking and masturbation bouts, dinner with the funny District Collector, sly gazes at his wife's exposed breasts and navel form witty and humorous sequences in the film, which add up to an unflattering image of the civil servants, whom independent India's first Home Minister, Sardar Patel described as the 'steel frame of India'.

His second film, *Split Wide Open* (1999) in English and Hindi- a blend of offbeat and entertaining values- did not qualify for the Indian Panorama but did well in box-office, distributed by 20th Century Fox, India. A bawdy and seductive young man, addicted to his scooter, looks for a 12-year old flower-seller girl in Mumbai, whom pimps might have abducted for selling to paedophiles. He finds her, only to be told that she won't return, quitting a job, which gives her good income. It is a very fast film, consistent with the pace of life in the city and has a torrid sequence of his sex with an anchor of hot talk show on the TV. His third film, *Ravan and Eddie* is also based on a contemporary English novel by an Indian and presents a cross-section of Mumbai where the new generation

of smart young people live and work. Benegal says, '*Ravan and Eddie*' is about my coming to terms with fantasy and reality. That in a country of extreme poverty, the only reality is fantasy.'

Nagesh Kukunoor

Then a US-based chemical engineer, Nagesh Kukunoor leapt to fame with his debut, '*Hyderabad Blues*' in 1998. The small-budget (20 lakh rupees) film did not qualify for the Indian Panorama but ran to full houses in Mumbai. It was invited to festivals at Denver, Atlanta and Hong Kong, besides featuring in IFFIs in Kolkata, Mumbai and Thiruvananthapuram. A NRI youth is caught between two cultures on a visit to home in India. He cannot relate to his kith and kin who insist on finding a bride for him. This shocks him, as he cannot think of marrying an unknown girl, decided by his well-wishers. Eventually, he meets a doctor girl who hates NRIs; he marries her but as their attitudes diverge, they separate. Though made in English, the film is strewn with songs and dialogues in Hindi and Telugu as well as choicest slangs and abuses of Hyderabad.

Kukunoor since made three more films in English, *Rockford* (2000) on happenings in a model school, *Bollywood Calling* (2001) on an American actor's weird experiences in Mumbai film industry, nicknamed 'Bollywood' and *Teen Deewarein* (2002). Both *Rockford* and *Bollywood Calling* were premiered in the Empire Cinema in London in November, last year. *Teen Deewarein*, made in English and Hindi, made it to the Indian Panorama, 2003 and was praised by the media. Based on his own story, the film dealt with interactions among three prisoners- a poetry-spouting lawyer, a man unhappy with the world and a happy-go-lucky charming person. Believing in reform of convicts, the jail warden makes the prison homely. A young woman arrives to make a documentary on the three convicts and as the shooting gets under way, a bond develops among the four. The film is about the sudden changes that convicts face for a crime which could be the folly of a rash moment. "One bad day, or one rash moment forever takes away from him the option to live his life as he chooses."

Shekhar Kammula

Dollar Dreams (1999) by Shekhar Kammula, another US-returned young man of Hyderabad won the national award for best debut film, next year. Kammula is a computer software consultant and was inspired to make the film on young Indians' craze for migrating to the U S. He did a filmmaking course in Howard University and his boyhood addiction to Hindi and Telugu blockbusters inspired him to shoot the film in 21 days with his and his brother's savings.

Vishal Bhandari

His 90-minute second film, *Maya-The Reality* (2000) in English-Hindi was selected from among 32 Indian films to represent India in the New York International Independent Film & Video Festival, held in March-April 2001. A maiden world premier

was held in a Manhattan theatre. It is about the feelings and sensibilities of a prostitute, Maya from early evening to next morning, through her dealings with five 'customers'. It was shot by an eight-member crew in just seven days with 55 thousand rupees, in digital technology in some red-light areas of Mumbai and Pune.

Others

Biju Viswanath gave up teaching in a college to make a 72-minute English film, *Déjà Vu* (2000) on a lighthouse mechanic who is left in a lonely island, as nobody picks him up for bad weather. He takes to his barn a stranger, washed ashore and nurses him back to health. Hearing a dialogue between two police ships, he suspects the stranger to be an absconding killer and to save himself and in panic, he kills him. He loses peace of mind when he hears another message on his wireless that the killer has been arrested. Fearing that he would be nabbed, he tries to hide the corpse, unsuccessfully. When the rescue boat arrives, he panics again, as its driver uncannily resembles the stranger, he had killed. The film qualified for the Indian Panorama, 2002.

Prakash Belawadi's *Stumble*, shown in 2003 Panorama, is about the director of a software company, which goes into red after the 'dotcom bubble' bursts. To start a call centre, he lays off his old employees, manipulating his friend and co-director. The plot gets very complex and murky thereafter with crazy exposures, diabolical conspiracies and 'feel-good' denouement. As Belawadi says, the film exposes the underbelly of the new economy, emerging in developing countries as a result of globalisation.

"The basic premise of the film is that we, the Indian middle class, have rushed into the world of the new economy without understanding it. The core motives have been greed, ruthless self-interest and alienation from our society."

Nilita Vachani's *When mother comes home for Christmas!* is about an illegal migrant woman of Sri Lanka, living in Greece where she looks after a little local girl child, while her own children fare ill in her home country. She gets a visa to return to Sri Lanka and stays with her children, just for a month.

Malayalam

In the 1990s, the Indian 'offbeat wave' seemed to be the highest in Kerala. In Indian Panorama, 1993, out of 18 films featured, five were Malayalam, against two in 1992. In 1994 Panorama in Mumbai, five out of 16 films were Malayalam. Next year, as many as nine national awards went to Malayalam films, for best music (Ravi), best background score (Johnson), best screenplay (M T Vasudevan Nair), for best cinematography (K V Anand) and for best book in cinema (Bharat Gopi). Malayalam cinema continues to produce the maximum number of offbeat films and of their makers till 2002; only in 2003 Bengali films overtook it in national awards.

In no other regional cinema, the offbeat and mainstream has come so close to each other as in Malayalam; the artistes and technicians worked in both without any qualm.

The industry at Thiruvananthapuram is certainly not as vigorous and thriving as in Mumbai and Chennai but the standard of average Malayalam mainstream films is not as low as in most other regional cinemas, Bengali included. This is attributed by eminent Keralites like Adoor Gopalakrishnan to the high rate of literacy (93%) and a culture steeped in literature, stage and classical dance forms like *Kathakali*.

The third generation filmmakers to watch are Murali Nair, Jayaraaj, A K Lohithadas, R Shyama Prasad, P M Abdul Azeez, Rajiv Vijaya Raghavan, Tanvir Ahmed, P Srikumar, V R Gopinath, Sivaprasad, Satish Menon, Asok R Nath and T Rajeevnath. Because of constraints of space, let us have a look at the most promising and take a bird's eye view of the rest.

Murali Nair

None of Murali Nair's films made it to the Indian Panorama but when his *Marana Simhasanam* ('The Throne of Death', 1999) won the prestigious *Camera d'Or* award at Cannes, the unfairness of the Panorama Selection Committee became evident. This has happened before too, conspicuously in the case of Susanta Mishra's *Oriya, Indradhanur Chhai* (1993).

Marana Simhasanam is a political film, about a poor seasonal labour who, being jobless, steals some coconuts from his landlord. Through a skein of events, he is accused of an unexplained murder, committed some years ago. Election approaches and some candidates take up his cause and parade his wife to woo voters. He is sentenced to death but prefers to die by newly introduced electronic chair in exchange of a lot of money that will go to wife and child. A statue is erected in his honour and the tiny island is linked by a bridge to attract tourists. Nair made two short films- *Tragedy of an Indian Farmer* (1993) and *A Long Journey* (1996); the second was premiered in Cannes.

Jayaraj

Four of Jayaraj's films made it to the Indian Panorama, beginning with *Desadanam* ('Journey to Wisdom', 1996) after he passed through a series of artistic and commercial failures. It was bitterly criticised after screening in the 28th IFFI in Thiruvananthapuram for its 'retrograde theme'. A small Brahmin boy memorises the *Vedas*, as his grandfather forces him to become an ascetic (*Sanyasi*) to have his sins expiated and avoid rebirth. The boy has to snap emotional ties with his parents and live the rest of his life as a recluse in an *ashram*. Three other films that also made it to the Indian Panorama, are *Kaliyattam* ('The Entertainment of the Gods', 1997), *Karunam* ('Pathos', 1999) and *Shantham* (2000).

Kaliyattam is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello*, presented in the eponymous Kerala stage form, using masks. *Karunam* is about the break-up of joint families under economic pressures. An old Christian couple in a lush countryside learn that their children, settled in the USA, have sold their house, without letting them know. Bewildered, they leave the house and go to an old-age home. The father dies; the children do not

perform his last rites. The mother wanders through the countryside in search of peace, which she finds at last in a home for mentally retarded children.

R Shyama Prasad

Only one feature by young R Shyama Prasad qualified for the Indian Panorama-*Agnisakshi* ('Fire, the Witness', 1998). It dealt with silent transition of the Kerala's traditional society to modern. A Nair Brahmin woman goes to Haridwar with his son and a grand daughter to immerse the ashes of her dead brother in the *Ganga* and to do his last rites. During the rituals, she is flooded with childhood memories of the brother. A complex story unfolds through flashbacks. She looks for a wife in the household who years ago, renounced the family to become an ascetic and finds her in holy Rishikesh. The *Sanyasini* puts her wedding chord (*mangal sutra*) in holy fire and gives the melted gold to the grand daughter. Completing a course in the University of Hull, U.K. on Media Studies as a Commonwealth scholar, Shyama Prasad had a long stint in Doordarshan as Programme Officer and made a number of telefilms. One of these, *Nilavu Ariyunnu* figured in Bulgarian International TV Festival.

P M Abdul Azeez

P M Abdul Azeez's fourth feature film, made 20 years after the third, *Athyu Nathangalil Kood Rampanithavar* ('Those who pitched their tents on the peaks', 1997) qualified for the Indian Panorama, next year. It is a tale of a small Christian clan in the backdrop of mass migration of people from the over-crowded plains of south Kerala to the vast virgin highlands in the north. The clan, headed by Yacob, face many calamities, like wild animals swooping on villages and crops and malaria taking its toll of the settlers. A Capuchian missionary chooses to live among them and help rebuild their houses and farms. A complex story unfolds, involving murders and labour revolt. The missionary sees Doomsday approaching; his favourite godchild goes astray. Further disillusion befalls him when he learns that the woman, Mariamma in whom he had found qualities of Virgin Mary, has been impregnated by the godchild who meets a tragic death, apparently terminating his race. Mariamma delivers a son and sees in it a new hope for a changing world.

T Rajeevnath

T Rajeev Nath's *Kadaltheerathu* ('On the Sea Shore', 1988) which was showcased in Indian Panorama, next year, is his fifth film. A man treks to a seaside prison where his son will be executed for murdering a landlord, unwittingly, after his goons humiliate him. As he goes toward the prison wearily, childhood memories of his son return to him in sentimental glow.

His second film that made it to the Indian Panorama, *Janani* ('Mother', 1999) is about a brief infatuation between a 10-year old boy and some half-a-dozen nuns in an old-age home in a hilly countryside. The boy, abandoned in a chapel on Christmas Eve, brings joy and happiness to the old nuns who delay its surrender to an orphanage,

as required under the law, on some pretext or the other. He becomes, as it were, an infant Jesus and kindles love in them; they had thought, there was nothing to look forward to except death. A childless Keralite couple, settled in the USA, offers to adopt it but regrets, sending a \$100 cheque, because the lady has conceived, meanwhile. Ultimately, the boy is taken to a child-care centre, run by a church. The film was premiered in Oslo (Norway) and won the national award for best direction in 1999. His other films, all offbeat, are *Thanal* (1976), *Theerangal* (1978), *Suryante Maranam*, *Purappad* (1983), *Kaveri* (1986) and *Aham*.

A K Lohithadas

A K Lohithadas came to cinema from the stage where he was a noted playwright and theatre activist; he also wrote a number of scripts for Sibi Malayil's films. Out of his 15 feature films, only one made it to the Indian Panorama in 1998. *Boothakkannady* ('Magnifying Glass', 1997) is about a watch-repairer (played by Mammoty) in a rural town, who meets a sad end after many vicissitudes. His wife dies of snakebite; he believes that the spouse of a snake that he had killed in his school days has taken revenge. Left with a girl child, he is drawn to a woman of different caste, whose marriage with another man ended in three months. This woman's only daughter is suspected to have been murdered by a hunter whom the watch-repairer did not like for his crude behaviour. In a chance encounter, he kills the hunter and is sentenced to jail for seven years. The woman is the only visitor to him in jail. He proposes to her to live together after he is set free. The jail-term shatters him in body and mind and when she arrives with her daughter, he is very demented and stares blankly at them.

Srinivasan

Srinivasan's *Chinta Vishtayaya Shyamala* ('Shyamala in Thought', 1998), showcased in Indian Panorama, next year, is about the 'darkness in human mind'. A woman with two little daughters is worried over the family, as she has no gold, insurance policy, or any other saving. Her husband, a happy-go-lucky type, takes a long leave from his job in a school and starts various businesses. Losses render the family even more precarious. Not caring for the family, he indulges in drinking bouts with his friends. His father and his wife's parents force him to go to Sabarimala to seek divine blessing but returning, he develops a religious mania and becomes eccentric. The woman decides to face life all alone and eventually, her husband returns, repentant. Srinivasan, an Economics graduate, is also a popular actor, having performed in some 100 Malayalam films in hero's and other roles. His three other films- *Sandhesam* (1994), *Vadaku Nokki Yathra* (1989) and *Doore Doore Koodu Koottam* (1986), were also awarded; the first two by the State government and the third by the President for best Malayalam film, the same year.

M P Sukumaran Nair

A FTII graduate, Sukumaran Nair's *Aparahnam* ('Late Afternoon', 1990) is an

artistic film on a young man of the 1960s, who gives up a career in a Kerala university, like so many of his generation, to join the extremist movement. He is arrested but after release lives with his mother- a teacher. His chance meeting with an old girl friend in the university brings back memories but he refuses to return to the movement; he also refuses to go to a Gulf country to earn a fortune. The police arrest him again for meeting suspicious people and he is detained throughout the Emergency period (1975-'77). Released from jail in 1977, he passes into a day-dreaming existence. Nair's second film, *Kazhakam* ('Temple Service', 1996) is about a young Brahmin girl who does sundry work in a temple- cleaning lamps, weaving garlands, milking the cows etc.- besides joining ritual prayers. She is considered wedded to God but creates a scandal when she conceives and becomes a mother.

V K Prakash

V K Prakash's debut, *Punaradhivasam* (1999), about a young man who lives away from his father in a city, got him a number of awards in Kerala. The old father is looked after by a young girl, whom he almost forces to marry his son. Another young girl (Nandita Das), once very poor, lives with a much older man without marrying him, which is said to be a new trend in Kerala. These five characters 'chase mirages', running away from the reality and their relationships do not develop coherently. The film seeks to depict new relationships emerging in Kerala, as the joint family gives way to nuclear family.

Others

Hariharan's *Parinayam* ('The Wedding', 1994) on M T Vasudevan Nair's story and *Sammohanam* ('Enchantment', 1994) by **C P Padmakumar** qualified for the Indian Panorama. **Siby Malayil's** *Akash Doothu* (1993) won a national award for the 'best film on family welfare' in 1994. In a hillside Kerala village with a dominant Christian population, an old woman, Annie is suffering from leukaemia; her husband was killed in a fight accidentally. On Christmas Eve, as she waits for her twin sons to arrive to her invitation, she bleeds to death. **B Lenin's** *Ooruku Nooruper*, (2000) and **Harikumar's** *Sukrutham* (1995) were also shown in the Indian Panorama. Harikumar also made *Jalakam* in 1986.

Promising among other 'new generation' directors are **Tanvir Ahmed** (*Chiruta*, 1980), **P Srikumar** (*Asthikaal Pookkunnu*, 1988), **Sivan** (*Abhayam*, 1991), **Ajayan** (*Perumthachan*, 1991), **V R Gopinath** (*Greeshmam*, 1980 and *Oru Maymasappulariyal*, 1987), **Sasikumar** (*Kavalam Chundan*, 1967), **Sivaprasad** (*Purooravas*, *Sairendhri*, *Vemfanad* and *Gowri*, 1992), **C P Padmakumar** (*Sammohanam*, 1994), **Harikumar** (*Sukrutham*, 1995), **K P Sasi** (*Ilayum Mullum*, 1993), **T K Rajeev Kumar** (*Jalamarmaram*, 1999), **R Sarath** (*Sayahnam*, 2000) and **James Joseph** (*Galileo*, 1994). Sivaprasad's *Gowri* is about a middle-aged man and a woman- once lovers- meeting and introspecting about their lives. Telugu mainstream director, **S S Rao** made a Malayalam offbeat, *Nira Darayum Milavilakkum* in 1977. In 2003 Indian Panorama in Delhi, five Malayalam films were screened- **Sibi Malayil's** *Ente Veedu...Appoontem*

(‘My Home...Appoo’s too’), **Satish Menon**’s *Bhavum* (‘Emotions of Being’), **Adoor Gopalakrishnan**’s *Nizhalkkuthu* (‘Shadow Kill’), **T V Chandran**’s *Padam Onnu: Oru Vilapam* (‘Lesson One: A Wail’) and **Asok R Nath**’s *Sabhalam* (‘A Fruitful Journey’).

Satish Menon was inspired by Tennessee William’s ‘A Streetcar named Desire’ and Dostoevsky’s ‘Crime and Punishment’ to make his 2002 film, *Bhavum* about a journalist, his lecturer wife, his aunt and her middle-aged bachelor son, living in a tranquil Kerala village. Into this family enters his wife’s elder sister who has lost her husband and her home in a city in a seemingly accidental fire. They move to a new home in the city, where the journalist secretly lusts for her. He unethically uses his newspaper to defend the role of private companies in running public utilities, which brings him more money and help him indulge in consumerism but distances his wife from him. **Asok R Nath**’s *Sabhalam* is about deep love between an old couple who are in absolute harmony, caring for each other. The film is a kind of lesson to younger generation to recognise that even in old age, couples can be happy in a nuclear family.

Telugu

The offbeat genre appears to be drying up in Telugu with very few in the third generation contributing to it. *Raktaksharalu* (‘Letters in Blood’, 1997) by **S Srinivas**, in the same vein as Gautam Ghosh’s *Ma Bhoomi* and B Narsinga Rao’s *Daasi*, is about a common woman’s resolve to fight the village rich and ruthless *Razakars* of Nizam. When a village headman molests a shephard’s wife in a field, neither her husband nor any villager dares protest to the local powers-that-be. The wife asks in agony, “Do we have to live like slaves here forever?”; the shepherd husband replies, “It is the curse of God. We are the *vetti chakri* (bonded labour). Life will be the same for us everywhere”. She decides to stay put and carry on her fight with the village rich and the Nizam’s *Razakars*. Srinivas had made 16 Kannada films before making this debut in Telugu.

G Haribabu’s feature, ‘Hindustan, the Mother’ (2001) which qualified for the Indian Panorama 2002, is about foiling some Kashmir terrorists’ plan to kill some VIPs. Children of a family, living next to the Home Minister’s residence, send out an e-mail which upsets the plan. They preach to the terrorists the beauty of life and the virtue of patriotism. **Boina Subba Rao**’s *Preminchu*, which also made it to the 2002 Indian Panorama, was inspired by the life of a 10-year old blind girl of Vishakhapatnam, who wrote the *Bhagvad Gita* in Braille script. A blind girl is born to a rich and arrogant woman who leaves her and the family in rage. Her father brings her up and she becomes a lawyer, acquiring a degree. A relative boy falls in love with her; coming to know of it, her mother asks her to forget the boy. The boy is pressed to marry another girl, which she does not. The girl’s father plans to kill the blind girl’s mother to grab her property and as the boy obstructs, the father kills him and implicates the rich woman with the murder. She goes to jail but is eventually released by the efforts of her blind advocate girl.

Kannada

The offbeat tradition does not appear to fare any better in Kannada. The only talent

in the third generation is Rahat Yusufi whose *Nairashya* (1996) qualified for the Indian Panorama. This short feature (53 minutes) in 16mm deals with a feminist theme-importance given by the society to the male progeny and discouragement of female education. A woman with already three daughters conceives after she was forced to abort two female foetuses by the family. Her brother's wife writes to him of an ascetic whose blessing can ensure a male child. Her husband and mother-in-law do not like her to go to him but her father-in-law encourages her to try. She goes to her brother's house to find that his wife has bluffed her; there is no such ascetic. She has called her to relax and have some respite from her in-laws. She returns home after some time; her husband believes that under the ascetic's blessing, she would give birth to a male child but the newborn is again a daughter. In despair, she wants to die and kill her daughters but refrains, thinking that she has no right to do so and that her four daughters would be orphans if she committed suicide.

Kavitha Lankesh, daughter of noted Kannada journalist, P. Lankesh made a mark with her first film, *Deveeri* (2000) which won the prestigious FIPRESCI award. A woman in an urban slum, Deveeri (Nandita Das) adopts an innocent boy, Kyatha as her brother. He grows up to see around him extensive corruption, like donation rackets for joining a school or a college, as a student or a teacher, underworld funding of filmmaking etc. Scales fall from his eyes when he discovers that Deveeri herself has taken to prostitution.

The very first feature, *Munnudi* ('A Preface', 2001) by **P Sheshadri**, a trained journalist, qualified for the Indian Panorama, 2002. It is on the widespread practice of marrying poor Indian Muslim girls to Arabian traders who keep them in posh hotels for sexual gratification. One such trader marries a coastal girl and pretends to love her. A girl is born to her but the trader does not return to take her for 16 years. She resists her society's offers of her re-marriage and the marriage of her by-now grown-up daughter to an Arab trader. Poverty goads her to agree to the latter and as a trader waits for the ceremony in a mansion, she sees the corpse of another girl, similarly married, floating in the river. Being furious, she barges into the trader's mansion, calls off the marriage and walks into freedom from fear and oppression. Another Telegu film, *Mussange* ('The Dusk', 2000) by **P R Ramadas Naidu** (his fourth), which also qualified for the Indian Panorama, 2002, is about the problems and sufferings of some old people with varying attitudes to life.

B S Lingadevaru's *Mouni* ('The Silent One') which made it to the 2003 Indian Panorama, is based on a story by the Jnanpith-winner novelist, U R Ananthamurthy. An elderly Brahmin suffers indignities by fellow Brahmins and a tormentor silently and with tolerance. The tormentor is unable to fathom his silence and himself ends up in silence. Lingadevaru, a maker of popular TV serials in Kannada, preaches the virtue of silence: "Moments of silence are inspiring and help in recharging ourselves and in establishing meaning and fullness."

Tamil

Shridhar Rajan made two more films- *Yer Munai* ('The Ploughshare', 1991) and *Vittu Vidalthalaiyage* ('In Search of Maya', 2000). The first carries over the theme of political corruption in dispossessed farmers and the second is about an elderly Sanskrit scholar. His son stages Sanskrit plays which nobody sees and his grand daughter puts up anti-fundamentalist plays on the streets.

Santosh Sivan, the veteran cameraman, made two films in Tamil, which made it to the Indian Panorama. *The Terrorist* (1998) is about the transformation of a young suicide-bomber from an unfeeling terrorist to a sensitive, sensual woman. A 19-year old girl (Ayesha Dharker) who joins a terrorist outfit after her brother, a member, is killed. She learns to suppress her tender feelings to be able to kill ruthlessly whomsoever the outfit wants her to. Her leader assigns her to blow up a celebrity by being a suicide bomber (as a Sri Lankan Tamil girl, Dhanu killed former Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi at Shri Perumbudur on 21 May 1991). As she waits for the daredevil act, she is swamped by feelings she had assiduously suppressed.

His next, *Malli* is a 90-minute fairy-tale-like feature, about a 10-year old girl who collects firewood for the family. She wants to own a new dress for a coming festival and acquire a 'blue bead', which a storyteller says, can remove her friend's inborn defect. She gratifies the story-teller with honey to learn from him the mumbo-jumbo, by reciting which she can coax the 'Good Spirit' to present her the 'blue bead'. She recites the rhyme, one night but nothing happens. On a festival day, she receives a new dress and as she returns from the forest, she sees a fawn, wounded by a poacher. She brings it to a village vet's house through a thick forest and throughout the night waits for its treatment. In the morning, she treks back home but seeing the fawn happy in the open, sets it free. Her new dress is spoilt beyond repair but she finds in the sand her coveted 'blue bead'.

Rajiv Menon's *Kandukondain Kandukondain* created a sensation in the U K, when it came among top 12 films of the Regus London Film Festival in November 2000. It is loosely based on Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*- about a family of four women who, being displaced from their homes, look back at their lives and start afresh. In English sub-titles, it got rave reviews in British media after failing in box-office in Chennai, Mumbai and New Delhi. Its Indian distributor said, it created a revolution of sorts in the genre of niche films and made him "take a second look at the until-now mostly-ignored market of sub-titled films".

A popular filmmaker and an actor, **Santana Bharathi** made *Mahanadhi* in 1993, which won the national award for best Tamil film of the year for being, as the citation read, 'an epic saga of a struggle against injustice'. Set in Thanjavur, it is about the owner of a betelnut factory, who dreaming to be rich, commits fraud and goes to jail. In 1994, *Mogha Mull* by **Gynana Rajasekharan**, an IAS officer, turned out to be an able adaptation of a literary work and received Indira Gandhi Award for 'the best first film

of a director'. His second feature, *Bharati* (2001) on the life of the Tamil nationalist poet, Subramanya Bharati, also qualified for the Indian Panorama, next year. He also made a short film, *Oru Kann Oru Parvai* (1998), also showcased in the Panorama. **Janaki Vishwanathan's** *Kutty* ('The Little One', 2001), which made it to the next year's Indian Panorama, is about a 10-year old daughter of a potter, who lives a carefree life, buys her a bicycle to go to a faraway school. The potter dies in an accident and plunges the family into dire poverty. She leaves study to become a housemaid of a family in a city, where a boy treats her badly. She pines to escape and one day, when her protector- the head of the family- goes on a trip, she runs away, not knowing how to return to her village.

Sundar C's *Anbe Sivam* ('Love is God', 2002) which qualified for Panorama, next year, is about two men who come to know each other, while waiting for a flight. As it is cancelled owing to bad weather, they share a room in a lodge and next day, travel to a railway station, where, as they wait for the train, they speak about their past. One of them, a former labour union leader, invites the other to his wedding, where the latter is surprised to find that the bride is none other than the girl whom he had loved but lost owing to her father's opposition. The father, owner of a factory, tried to separate them but while trying to flee with the girl to Kerala, they meet with an accident, which disfigures him. He now asks his manager to 'eliminate' him but the kind manager lets him off.

Amshan Kumar, a documentary maker, made his debut feature, *Oruthithi* ('A Girl') in 2002. Shown in 2003 Panorama, it is based on a well-known Tamil novel, written by K Rajnarayan, awarded by Sahitya Akademi. It deals with oppression of *Dalit* people through familiar syndromes- a merciless landlord extracting taxes from the people and spending it for his pleasures, not depositing it in treasury, a revenue official coming to know the truth from villagers, a *Dalit* girl in love with an upper-caste boy and its unpleasant consequences.

In North-Eastern Dialects

The very first films made in certain north-eastern dialects avoided mainstream ingredients and tended to offbeat. Apart from Assamese and Manipuri, films are being made in Bodo, Karbi and Khasi dialects too. The first Bodo film was made in 1986, the first Karbi and Khasi in 1983. Altogether 10 feature films have been made in these dialects until 2000- five in Bodo and five in Karbi and Khasi.

Bodo

Some 10 lakh Bodos live in Kokrajhar and adjacent districts in north Assam and for almost two decades, were carrying on a secessionist movement, often very violent until in November 2003 they came to a settlement with the State and Central governments. Their dialect is more akin to Tibeto-Burmese than to Assamese. Two Bodos are pioneering filmmaking in their own dialects and two of their films made it to the Indian Panorama.

Gautam Bora

After completing his studies at Babelsberg at Potsdam, Gautam Bora assisted Dr. Bhabendra Nath Saikia to make *Agnisnaan* (1985). Four years later, he made his first feature film, *Wosobispo* ('The Call of the Cuckoo', 1990) on a shoe-string budget, which was acclaimed in the Indian Panorama, next year. A young teacher lives in a village, nestled among green hills, where everybody has intimate relation with nature. One day, he is required to go to the district headquarter town, much against his will. The film examines his reluctance and in the process, delves deep into the 'collective unconscious' of the Bodo people.

Jwngdao Bodosa

Jwngdao learnt filmmaking in FTII, Pune and made the first Bodo feature, *Alayaron* (1986). He made some 15 documentaries and two other films in the dialect- *Kwmsi Lama* (1991) and *Hagramayaojinahari* ('Rape in a Virgin Forest', 1995); the last made it to the Indian Panorama. A poor forest-dweller lives by stealing wood, felled by contractors, which he then sells to middlemen. A groom's people demand a dowry for her daughter's marriage, which he cannot afford unless he doubles his income. As forest guards foil his moves, he joins illegal smugglers. He cuts down trees for them on the sly, which are tied into rafts and floated downstream. One day, some drunken smugglers rape his daughter. The title is also a metaphor of rampant deforestation, occurring in many mountain forests.

XVIII. Indian Filmmakers in the West

“A voice was ready to speak and ready to be heard. This is a particular kind of voice, because it is not indigenously Indian.”

*—Deepa Mehta
(Canada-based Indian film-maker)*

A new trend in the 1990s was the making of feature and short films by Indians abroad, officially called ‘Non-Resident Indians’, or in brief, NRIs and ‘independent filmmakers’ of Indian origin. They were inspired by the phenomenal success in the West of Mira Nair’s Hindi debut, *Salaam Bombay* in 1988, comparable to that of Ray’s *Pather Panchali* in 1955. Indians abroad did make films before her too. In the Silent Era, Himanshu Rai co-produced with German UFA, and directed, three films on Indian themes in English, including one on Lord Buddha, all of them featuring Devika Rani (later his wife). Niranjan Pal (son of Bipin Chandra Pal), then living in London, wrote film scripts and several plays for the city’s theatres but no other expatriate Indian before Mira Nair took the Western world by such a storm as she did with a maverick film on a runaway boy, earning his living by doing errands for prostitutes and their ‘customers’ in a red-light area in Mumbai.

The films, made by them in and outside India, generally seek release on foreign televisions- mainly in the USA and Europe; some of them are entered in the IFFIs and Indian Panorama too. In DVDs and VCDs, some of them circulate in cities, passed by censors. Some of these films have also been seen in India in both festivals and public halls and been box-office successes. *Salaam Bombay*, for instance, bagged top awards in major festivals in India, beginning with the IFFI, 1989 and the West and had long runs in packed houses in America and Europe. A visiting foreign festival director had remarked to Satyajit Ray at that time (to his considerable unease) that after *Pather Panchali* no Indian film caused such a furore in the West.

Mira Nair

Born to Punjabi parents in Bhubaneswar (Orissa) in 1957, Mira Nair is now settled in New York. Educated in Simla and Delhi, she acted in Delhi’s repertory theatre before going to Harvard University in 1976 for a degree in sociology. *Salaam Bombay* came as a whiff of fresh breeze in Mumbai, being on a bold theme and technically innovative. Much of it was shot in hand-held camera on dingy streets, brothels, railway platforms and roadside teashops of Mumbai by a new cameraman, Sandi Sissell. Scripted by Sooni Taraporewala after two months of research, it is about a 10-year old boy (played by an orphan, Syed Shafique; growing up, he acted in Gautam Ghosh’s *Patang*) who, fleeing

from a touring circus, lands in a red-light area of Mumbai. He serves tea and snacks to the sex-workers, pimps and 'customers', aiming to save 500 rupees to give to his mother. He sees the adult world of libidinous men and women, exploitative 'madams' (keepers of brothels) and middlemen, police and drug-peddlers, love drying up in lust for flesh and 'fatherless' children becoming waifs and strays, drawn into the vortex of sin and crime. *Salaam Bombay* got the *Camera d'Or* prize at Cannes and was distributed world-wide.

Her next film, *Mississippi Masala* ('Spicy Mississippi', 1991) was about an Indian family, fleeing from Uganda during Idi Amin's ethnic cleansing in 1972 and settling at Jackson in Michigan State (USA), which become a veritable 'Little India'. The father, an advocate, sets up a motel, which is run by his daughter, while he works on a lawsuit to recover assets, left in Uganda. Her daughter's car runs into a black carpet-cleaner's truck, and from this accident, they develop an affair, causing trauma to him.

After her 1993 feature, *Perez Family* on Cuban refugees in Miami, USA, she returned to India to make *Kama Sutra* ('A Tale of Love', 1997), a feature about a 16th century prince with an insatiable lust for women. Hindi actress, Rekha played a tutor of sage Vatsayan's eponymous treatise on sex, who prepares young women for the enjoyment of the prince. One of them falls in love with a sculptor; the prince in jealousy conspires to get him killed, trampled by a royal elephant.

Nair's 1998 film, *My Own Country* is about an Indian doctor, his wife and a child, settling in the US city of Tennessee with hopes for a happier life; they consider USA as their 'own country'. He joins the Infectious Diseases Department of a hospital, where the first AIDS cases have been detected. The disease spreads, keeping him busy in the hospital. His wife leaves him and he himself, facing deep racist prejudices about his origins, is compelled to leave the town.

Her second international rave came on 8th September 2001 when her *Monsoon Wedding* (2001) won an award in Cannes and the prestigious Golden Lion for Best Feature at Venice Festival which before her, went to only one other Indian, Satyajit Ray for *Aparajito* in 1956.

Monsoon Wedding is about two hilarious Punjabi Hindu weddings in Delhi; Ms. Nair described it as a 'love song to Delhi'. It interweaves five different episodes of love and lust, even for a girl child by a paedophile. During typically Punjabi pre-marriage orgies of songs and dances, spread over four days and nights, (similar to those in 1993 *Hum Apke Hai Kaun?*), skeletons come out of the family closet. The bride's cousin sister accuses a family patriarch, living abroad, of raping her when she was a child and trying to molest her girl child too. The bride confesses to the US-settled groom about her affair with a local boy; the groom forgives her. A decorator's labour falls in love with a maid and in the end two marriages are solemnised in pouring rains of July. Like *Salaam Bombay*, much of it was shot in hand-held camera to give it a documentary feel. Her latest film, *Hysterical Blindness* (2002), made for the HBO channel on TV, was shown in Sundance festival, early in 2003.

Often compared with Satyajit Ray's for their international acclaim, her films do not

have the profundity or timeless appeal of Ray's; they are also not so consistently artistic. She uses technological innovations, like hand-held camera, freeze shots and jump cuts but prurient scenes of amour, explicit sex and nudity, excessively in *Kamasutra*, make her films verge on soft-porn.

Deepa Mehta

Deepa Mehta, a Toronto-based emigrant Indian, planned three 'elemental' films on India; she could complete only two of them- *Fire* in 1996 and *Earth* (also known as *1947*), next year. In February 2000, she went to Varanasi amid much fanfare to shoot the third, *Water* but Hindu fanatics would not let her even begin. The protesters formed a society to oppose her and on the first day of shooting, burnt the sets. They said, the three places that she chose for shooting on Varanasi *ghats* on the *Ganga*, are sacred to the Hindus and out of bound for widows and prostitutes; in one of these, Sant Tulsidas wrote the *Ramayana*. Secondly, the title was 'objectionable'; the *Ganga* is no ordinary 'water' ("One should not call one's mother as wife", they said.); no place on its banks can be defiled by shooting of such an impious film. Thirdly, a film showing a widow becoming a prostitute in Varanasi will be a slur on the holy city. They quoted two dialogues: a character saying, 'Brahmin and God can sleep with whomsoever they want and the women they sleep with are blessed', and another observing that "there is no difference between a widow and a prostitute; both are soiled goods".

The fanatics did not relent, even after a chorus of protests by intellectuals, nationwide. Some of them filed a public interest petition (PIL) in the Supreme Court to force the Government take action against these 'cultural inquisitors'. The case was complicated by a noted Bengali writer complaining about Ms. Mehta plagiarising his story. Incidentally, Satyajit Ray planned to make a film (*Drabamoyir Kashibas*) on a story about a Bengali widow settling in Varanasi, written by *Pather Panchali*'s writer but death intervened.

Fire (1996) is about two daughters-in-law (given mythological names- Radha and Sita) in a joint family, who being sexually starved by their eccentric husbands, engage in lesbianism. The elder (Shabana Azmi), being infertile, cannot conceive; her husband, running a video shop, abstains from sex on the advice of a *guru*. The husband of the younger (Nandita Das) avoids sex with her, because elders did not permit him to marry a Chinese-Canadian woman, he loved. Lesbianism becomes for them the 'only possible form of rebellion' against their asexual husbands. The film created media hype, when screened in the 1997 IFFI in Thiruvananthapuram. Released commercially soon after, it had to be taken off screen in Delhi and Mumbai because of fundamentalists' protests and went for a review by the Censor Board who let it off again without any cut. It was shown in 33 countries and awarded in 14.

Her 1997 film, *Earth* (aka *1947*) is based on a Pakistani writer, Bapsi Sidhwa's novel, *Cracking India* but Islamabad which had awarded the writer, did not allow the film to be shot in Lahore. It was shot extensively in Delhi- the ambience being similar.

The story is told through the eyes of a seven-year old Parsee girl whose family considers it 'expedient' to remain neutral in the mounting tension between Hindus and Muslims of Lahore before Independence. She even encourages love between her Hindu *aya* and a Muslim suitor. To remain 'neutral', she betrays him, although he had cared for her most. Nandita Das who became in the mid-1990s a major offbeat actress, made her debut in the role of the Parsee daughter.

Her 2002 feature, *Bollywood/Hollywood* opened the 'Perspective Canada' programme in the Toronto Film Festival on 6th September that year. A young Indian millionaire, owning an Internet company, gets a Toronto-born Indian model pose as his fiancé to please his mother who would not give his sister in marriage until he chose a wife. It is wholly shot in Canada where Indian expatriates "worship at the alter of Bollywood within their homes and are assailed by Hollywood, the minute they step out", as she said, in defence of the title. She denies that she is making 'art films' but believes, "a genre is coming up which is neither art cinema nor commercial cinema- yet has integrity and is commercially acceptable".

Manoj Night Shyamalan

Born in 1974 to doctor parents, hailing from Mahe (an enclave of Pondicherry in Kerala) but settling in Philadelphia (USA), Manoj made his first home movie at the age of 10; he made 45 short films in the next six years. At the age of 17, spurning offer of scholarships to study medicine in several colleges, he chose to study filmmaking in New York University. His debut feature, *Praying with Anger* did not make the sensation in the USA that his second, *Sixth Sense* (1999) did. Co-produced by him, it became a huge box-office success in the USA, won Oscars for the best film of the year and in several other categories. It ran for over a month in over 2000 American cineplexes and grossed some 700 million dollars (nearly 3500 crore rupees), featuring among the top ten box-office hits of all time. It is about an eight-year old American boy, disturbed by a 'sixth sense' that makes him see dead persons, whom others do not see. A psychiatrist, played by Hollywood superstar, Bruce Willis (of *Armageddon* fame) for a song, accompanies him in various places in half-belief but cannot cure him.

His next, *Unbreakable*, also starring Bruce Willis, was not as successful. His third, *Signs*- a spooky space thriller- was released all over the USA on 2nd August 2002 to rave media hype. *Newsweek* magazine put him on a cover and described him as 'Hollywood's next great entertainer', as promising as Steven Spielberg. Producer Walt Disney gave him five million dollars- the world's highest fee to a scriptwriter- to write it and another 7.5 million to direct it. Like his other films, it is also shot in Philadelphia where he lives. It is as scary as a Hitchcock film but is more akin to an early Spielberg whom he adores. A Pennsylvania farmer – a former minister- loses his wife in a car accident and as he and other members of his family try to remake their lives without her, mysterious circles appear in his cornfields, claimed as telltale signs of visits by aliens from other planets.

Shekhar Kapoor

International hype over his *Bandit Queen* (1994) brought a prestigious offer to him from a British producer to make an expensive feature film on Queen Elizabeth-I of England (*Elizabeth 1st*, 1998), which got an Oscar award for make-up. He has shot a feature film on the South African legend, Nelson Mandela but it is yet to be released.

‘Independent’ Films

A new genre of films by expatriate Indians has emerged in the USA and Europe that erases the mainstream-offbeat divide and cuts across geographic borders. Called ‘independent’ films, these are wacky, full of quirky humour and sophistication. Some of them seek to expose the faultlines in cross-cultural relations between India and the West, the so-called ‘East-West Dialectic’. Interestingly, they do not have any problem in getting producers or financiers. Some of their films, e.g. Deepa Mehta’s, are distributed in the USA by Hollywood’s leading independent film company, Miramax. In the USA and Europe, independent filmmaking is no longer difficult. And the so-called ‘Indie Films’ (e.g. *The English Patient*, *Fargo* & *Shine*), made outside the Hollywood studio system, bagged many Oscars since 1997. In fact, ‘independent filmmaking’ is having a boom now, like that of Indo-Anglian writing in the late 1980s, from which many of their makers are drawing their story lines. Apart from the BBC (Channel Four), French and German Television, many private investors are coming forward to help making of independent films, particularly about India.

Their makers have a completely different outlook on filmmaking. For example, **Udayan Prasad** says, “I don’t see myself as an Indian or British filmmaker. I am an internationalist, making grown-up, challenging, stimulating films”. **Gurinder Chadha** says, “The world is much bigger than being just Hindustani or British, The time right now is to talk in complexities.”

Ismail Merchant*

‘Independent cinema’s biggest success is Ismail Merchant (born in Mumbai in 1936), an expatriate Indian (author of many books on Indian cuisine) settled in New York. Meeting James Ivory of California in 1960, they launched a very successful production company, ‘Merchant-Ivory Productions’ whose widely acclaimed films won six Oscars and some 31 nominations for Academy awards over the years. Their first feature was in English, *The Householder* (1961), shot in Daryaganj, Delhi, extensively shown in India. Then followed ten of their most successful films, concerned with India, across 40 years- *The Delhi Way* (1964), *Shakespearewallah* (1965), *The Guru* (1969), *Bombay Talkie* (1970), *The Courtesans of Bombay* (1982), *Heat & Dust* (1983), *A Room with a View* (1985), *The Deceivers* (1988) and *In Custody* (aka *Muhafiz / Hifajat*, 1993) and a short on scholar, Nirad C Choudhury, *Adventures of a Brown Man in search of civilization* (1972). Most of them were set and shot in India and dealt with experiences

*Since expired

of Western people visiting India on various connections. Together, their company produced, and Ivory directed, some 30 long and short features, which were offbeat in both Indian and Western contexts. Two other Indians were associated with their productions- Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, novelist writing stories and adapting English classic novels for many of their films and Shashi Kapoor (who acted in three of them- *The Householder*, *Shakespearewallah* & *In Custody* (aka *Muhafiz /Hifajat*). Their company gave a yeoman service by restoring and preserving negatives of Satyajit Ray's films and marketing them globally in restored versions.

Muhafiz, based on Anita Desai's English novel, *In Custody* got the national award for best Urdu film of 1993. A college teacher, being asked by a newspaper to interview a noted Urdu poet, Nur, living in Bhopal, goes through numerous odds to record it in tape. The vivacious poet, then old and forgotten, is roused, craves for recognition once again but gulps food and alcohol more than reciting poetry. The tape-recorder breaks down; the place turns out to be a brothel. When the professor despairs, he receives from the dying poet 'all his work' in a package, left to be preserved in his custody'. Though become obese, Shashi Kapoor breathed life into the poet's role. The film underlined the decline of Urdu in Delhi other cities from a court language in Mughal India to virtually a fringe dialect after Independence.

Other 'Independent' Filmmakers

Other expatriate Indian 'independent filmmakers' are Rajan Khosa, Gurinder Chadha, Kaizad Gustad, Udayan Prasad, Srinivas Krishna, Harish Saluja, Amar Bose, Aditya Bhattacharya, Preeti Chandrakant, Khodus Wadia, Sukanta Roy, Asif Kapadia and Tarsem Singh.

Rajan Khosa's *Dance of the Wind* was premiered in London, where he lives, in July 1998, presaging a mini-festival of films, made in Mumbai. The film- 'in the nature of middle cinema', as he put it- was funded by six different countries, not India, where he also did not find a distributor. He did his next film in London too, dealing with an Anglo-Asian love story. "I want to look at India's colonial past and what it has done to our psyche", he told a London daily in July 1998.

Gurinder Chadha was born to Punjabi parents in Kenya but is presently living in London. She made several short and documentary films in English, notably a satire, *I am British, but....* (1989), before making her first feature, *Bhaji on the Beach* in 1993. It is a mock-serious film with a feminist ethos, exposing Asian immigrants in Britain. During an all-women picnic at Blackpool, members of the Asian Women's Centre in Birmingham, of various ages and backgrounds, reveal their secret traumas, like beating by husbands, extra-marital affairs (impregnation by an Afro-Caribbean boy friend) etc. In a sequence, the noted Silent Era actress, silver-haired Zohra Sehgal makes a hilarious blast at a male striptease. *Bend it like Beckham* (2002) proved to be a huge box-office success in England and other European countries. She has announced a new feature, 'Bride & Prejudice', an adapted version of Jane Eyre's 'Pride and Prejudice', featuring Aishwarya Rai- a 'Miss World' turned a rave cine actress in Mumbai- in the adapted role of Elizabeth Bennet.

Nandana Dev Sen, daughter of the Nobel laureate Amartya Sen by his first wife, Nabanita lived in London where she wrote, produced and directed six short features- *Tamina*, *Sugar & Spice*, *The Turning World*, *The Nose Lever*, “*Don’t stand so close to me!*” and *Arranged Marriage*. These were shown in some European cities. She also wrote the script of *Maarya* (in which she played the lead role), directed by a Canadian, Hunt Hoe. It was about a young Muslim student, trying to start a new life in Canada by taking over a restaurant, owned and run by an expatriate Bengali Brahmin family. Eventually, the father of the family arranges a marriage between her and his son.

Kaizad Gustad’s *Bombay Boys* (1997) is about three young men, coming from Sydney, London and New York to discover Mumbai. They dance, near naked, in a notorious nightclub, cheered lustily by 25 middle-aged women. Gustad calls the film ‘all charm and chutzpah’ and himself an ‘international tramp’. **Udayan Prasad’s** second feature, *My Son, the Fanatic* (1997), premiered at 1977 Cannes Film Festival to standing ovation, is the story by Hanif Qureshi of an Asian taxi driver (Om Puri), living in a British industrial town, pained by his son embracing a militant Islamic sect.

Srinivas Krishna, once an assistant to Deepa Mehta, has made three feature films- *Masala*, *Lulu* and *Waiting for the Mahatma*. The last is based on a popular novel by R K Narayan about a romance between two of Gandhi’s followers during the Second World War. Pittsburg-based **Harish Saluja’s** English feature, *The Journey* (1999) is about a widowed Indian school master (Roshan Seth) going to the USA to visit his doctor son and US-born daughter-in-law. He waxes eloquent on Indian family values and says, if they were born in India, his grand children would have got more parental attention.

Amar Bose’s 100-minute Bengali feature, *Mishra Raag* (‘The Symphony’, 1992) is about alienation of non-resident Indians in the USA. An expatriate Bengalee marries an American girl but their marital happiness is marred by cross-cultural tensions. A Bengali girl who had migrated to the USA feels homesick for Kolkata; returning, she tracks down her old friends and while hosting a dinner, indulges in memories of the past. Talking of the good old times, they feel that they are trapped in an alien country and that their decision to migrate to the USA may not have been very wise. Wholly shot in the USA, it drew on his experiences of living in Kolkata for 26, and in New York for 14, years. A computer engineer by profession, Bose attended classes on cinema in a New York institute and worked on several US productions before making this debut.

Aditya Bhattacharya (son of Basu Bhattacharya) who made his first feature, *Raakh* (‘Ashes’) in 1988, made a bilingual film, *Senso Unico* (*One Way* in English) in Rome where he settled, marrying an Italian architect. **Preeti Chandrakant**, living in Switzerland, made a film, *Jesus goes to India!* (2000). Some theologists and UFO scholars, like Erich Von Daniken, believe that Jesus was in India during his adolescence and youth, visiting places of Hindu interest and studying Hindu religious discourses. A young European traveller, believing like them, traces his route to India, led by a seductive woman but the journey leads to the discovery of an obscure case. The film caused unease to the Swiss parliament and media critics in Vatican severely criticised it but some Swiss churches offered to fund it, if some changes were carried out.

Khodus Wadia's 45-minute film in English, *Dreamers* (1999) is about a Hindu boy and a Muslim girl who are in love, to their societies' stiff opposition. Being no longer unable to cope with social and family pressures, they spend their last night together in a friend's house before committing suicide.

Sukanta Roy's recreation of Rabindranath Tagore's childhood days, *Amaar Chhelebel* (1996), based on the poet's own eponymous memoir, was released in a Glasgow theatre in May 2001. The film was shot in Kolkata, Digha, a sea resort on the Bay of Bengal, Shantiniketan and in the ancestral house of Tagores at Jorasanko in north Kolkata and shown in three Kolkata halls also, to very lukewarm reception.

Asif Kapadia, born and brought up in London, made his debut with a short, *The Sheep Thief* after passing out from the Royal College of Art. It was praised in Locarno, Melbourne and several other festivals. However, he shot into limelight with his second, a full-length feature *The Warrior* in 2002, inspired by a Japanese folk tale, in which a warrior's son is shown a head and asked, if it was his father's. It was Britain's entry in the foreign film section of the Academy awards in 2003 but did not qualify, as judges ruled that the film was not wholly in Britain's 'indigenous' language (it has a six-minute dialogue in Hindi). It is about a man's spiritual journey from his violent days in Rajasthan to the peace of the Himalayas. Kapadia likes to shoot his films in India, because the stories he is interested in have a magical or mystical element which is more believable in India than in the UK. Besides, Indian landscapes are 'awesome' and the light 'beautiful'. A short feature, *Ek Pal* ('For One Moment') in Hindi by **Karamjeet Ballagan**, 41, an ethnic Indian health worker in Birmingham (UK), focussed on the dreadful social ramifications of AIDS through a maudlin story.

XIX. Documentary and Short Films

“Films, short films, as opposed to features, can help powerfully to do something which India, and the rest of the world, would wish to have done”.

—James Beveridge

Documentary and short films are offbeat, because most of them cannot be in any other genre; their makers also often avoid the beaten track. After all, both offbeat feature films and documentaries are ‘creative interpretation of the reality’, which cannot be said of any other genres. Short features originated as comedy gags in the early talkie era but offbeat directors varied their themes, keeping their length below an hour to show them on television, or to combine them with other short features under omnibus titles, like Satyajit Ray’s *Teen Kanya* (1961) and *Kapurush-o-Mahapurush* (1965).

The credit for making the first short films and documentaries goes to the first maker of movie strips, H S Bhatwadekar, aka ‘Sawe Dada’. In fact, he was the ‘father of Indian factual film’, making half a dozen topicals and newsreels- all silent, e.g. on the reception of Dr. R P Panajpye, first Indian Wrangler of Cambridge University in 1901. (See Appendix 3) Then came India’s first feature filmmaker, D G Phalke who not only made scores of mythologicals and devotionals but also some 30 short and 12 little longer films in other genres, like comedy, history, biography, crime and social. In certain years- 1914 to 1916- he made shorts and documentaries only, even after his debut feature, *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) made such a sensation, being India’s first *Swadeshi* film. In Kolkata too, Hiralal Sen who shot scenes from popular stage plays made a number of short films, the antetypes of newsreel from 1898. In fact, Sen might have made India’s first movie film even before Sawe Dada. He showed these on ‘bioscope’ of his Royal Bioscope Company. He competed with British teams in covering the Coronation ceremony of George V and the Queen and the 1912 Delhi Durbar. He also made a number of topicals on fishermen, anti-malaria drugs, bathing ghats on the Bhagirathi river in Kolkata and processions in the city.

Elsewhere, Narayan G Deware, Patankar brothers, Hiralal Sen and pioneer production companies, like Star, Prabhat, Imperial and Aurora also made ‘topicals’, the early term for documentaries. The Imperial Film Company covered the trail of devastation, left by Quetta earthquake in 1934 with a running commentary, appealing for funds for rehabilitation of victims. These pioneers, well-versed in the concepts and techniques of filmmaking in Europe and America, “truly laid the foundation of Documentary Movement” from the mid-1930s in Mumbai. In Chennai, besides R Prakash and C Rangiah, K Subramanian,

the feature filmmaker, also made a number of shorts on south Indian cities for the Railways for tourist promotion.

Addition of sound gave a spurt to the making of short films and between 1920 and 1940, more than 1500 short films were produced in India. From 1937 to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, the short film industry thrived as never before. Wadia Brothers made documentaries on the Royal Indian Navy and the Royal Indian Air Force. Various companies sponsored shorts on sugar, steel, iron and textile industries.

When in the West, Robert Flaherty, Dr. John Grierson, F W Murnau, Paul Rotha and Basil Wright were revolutionising documentary in the 1930s, a similar movement got under way in India. With addition of soundtrack in 1931, a fresh batch of 'topical' and other short filmmakers emerged in Mumbai, notably Dr. P V Pathy, K S Hirelekar and D G Tendulkar. Dr. Pathy studied cinematograph at ETPC in Paris, was awarded Doctor of Letters by Sorbonne University, and before returning to Mumbai, shot topicals in Paris and Sahara. Hirelekar studied in Germany when *Kultur Films* were in vogue; so did Tendulkar in Berlin and Moscow.

Topicals on Mahatma

Tendulkar later wrote the monumental biography of Mahatma Gandhi. Dr. Pathy also compiled the first feature-length biography of Gandhi for A K Chettiar of *Documentary Films*, Chennai, using much of his predecessors' footage. Later, Vithalbhai Jhaveri made a six and half hour biography on Mahatma Gandhi and Chettiar incorporated footage of Indian National Congress sessions in Chennai, of the cremation of Tilak etc, to make an 11-reel biography of Mahatma for release on the Independence Day on 15th August 1947. In 1937 the British government in India lifted the ban from release of 14 topicals on Mahatma, made by private companies, notably *Mahatma Gandhi's March for Freedom*, *Mahatma Gandhi's Historic March*, *Mahatma Gandhi returns from London*, *Bombay welcomes Mahatma Gandhi*, *The Return of Mahatma Gandhi from the Round-Table Conference*, *Mahatma Gandhi after his release* and *Epoch-making Voyage of Mahatma Gandhi to London*.

Precursors of Films Division

The Second World War brought a boom in making of short films. The British had used silent shorts during the first War (1914-1919) to spur the Allied offensive. When the Second broke out, it decided to use short films to boost the morale of its troops. It set up a Film Advisory Board (FAB) in June 1940; its first Chairman, J B H Wadia got a number of 'war-effort' documentaries made by a British filmmaker, Alexander Shaw, appointed FAB's first Chief Producer. The FAB got into an arrangement with the 20th Century Fox for regular production of Indian versions of its newsreels and entrusted making of some documentaries to private agencies too, like D J Keymer (employer of Satyajit Ray till 1956), Wadia Movietone, Prabhat Film Company, Famous Cine Laboratories and National Studios. Shaw's successor, V Shantaram resigned from FAB in response

to Gandhiji's call for non-cooperation in 1942. Ezra Mir, who had learnt filmmaking in the United States, became the Board's third Chief Producer. Eventually, realising the limitations and uneven quality of the FAB, the government started the *Information Films of India* (IFI) and *Indian News Parade* (INP), both on 1st February 1943. It also raised the Central Kinematograph Services for making training and motivational films for the troops.

Some of the producers in Chennai and Kolkata also made 'war-effort' short films for the regional centres of the FAB. Ezra Mir headed the IFI and William J Moylan, a British cameraman-director, the INP. To ensure compulsory screening of their releases, the government made it obligatory for every exhibitor, under the Defence of India Rules, to screen up to two thousand feet of these films. Between 1940 and 1946, the FAB and the IFI produced over 170 short films and documentaries, apart from INP releases. Besides boosting the morale of the troops, these films aimed to inspire industrial and farm labour to produce more and to attract soldiers for recruitment. Some dealt with arts, crafts, classical dances and other elements of Indian culture also. Under Ezra Mir, IFI grew fast and mustered good technicians and administrators; it dubbed foreign documentaries into Indian languages. Documentaries, made by the Army Film Centre, were released through the IFI. In 1945, a documentary made on coconut tree won an award, the first for India.

The IFI ended abruptly in 1946, when after the Labour Party, led by Clement Atlee, came to power in Britain, the Interim government in Delhi cut down grants to the IFI and the INP. Their assets were bought over by Ambalal J Patel for his Central Cine Corporation. On its ashes rose, in April 1948, the Films Division, this has been the biggest institution for making documentaries and newsreels in Independent India.

When the War ended in 1945, the *raison d'être* of the FAB diminished. The nationalist leaders looked upon it as 'a dreadful institution which has dragooned the nation into war'. In the Budget for 1946-'47, the Central Assembly reduced the grant for the IFI to one rupee. Meanwhile, the new styles and concepts of documentary in Europe and the USA had filtered through the FAB to India's short filmmakers and the association of foreigners, like Winifred Holmes, Tom Stobart and Sinclair Reed, gave to Indian documentary movement a Western inspiration and ethos. Outside the Films Division, however, there were a number of talents, exclusively making documentaries and short features, e.g. S Sukhdev, Rajbans Khanna, Anand Patwardhan and a host of offbeat directors who also made excellent documentaries and short features.

Much before the new institutes were set up, the most important government organ for making of documentaries, newsreels and short features had come into being. At the stroke of 12 midnight on 14th August 1947, when India became free from British rule, there was no government film unit to record this historic transfer of power. The releases under *Information Films of India* and the *Indian News Parade* ended in 1946. Foreign newsreel cameramen, based in New Delhi, filmed the midnight ceremonies in Delhi and the nation-wide celebrations for a few days afterward. Dr. Pathy persuaded Ambalal J

Patel to organise a film unit for shooting Nehru's famous 'tryst with destiny' speech in Parliament, that night. In the following week, three documentary films on the historic event, all made by non-official persons and units were released in the metropolitan cities, *Mahatma Gandhi* by A K Chettiar, *India's Struggle for National Shipping* by Paul Zils for Scindia Steamship Navigation Company and *15th August 1947*, made jointly by the Mumbai Talkies and the 'Film Classics of Chennai' - all distributed free of charge.

In December 1947, the new Union Government approved a scheme for reviving a film-producing and distributing organization, at the instance of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, then Home Minister, also holding charge of Information & Broadcasting. He and Nehru realized that if wartime documentaries and training films could motivate so much, they could help equally in nation building during peace.

Films Division

Thus came into being the Film Unit in Mumbai, which took the name of the Films Division in April 1948 with Mohan Bhavnani at the helm. In 55 years, it had a luxurious growth and by 1990, it produced and released over 7,000 of them in English and several Indian languages. It played such a seminal role in promotion of documentaries, newsreels and other short films that the UNESCO remarked in a report, "The Division has touched Indian life at a number of points and has influenced the country's other cinematographic institutions."

Mohan Bhavnani

Mohan Bhavnani was appointed Deputy Controller of Documentaries in July that year, re-designated as Chief Producer (Documentaries). Bhavnani set up the Division in Gulshan Mansion on Pedder Road. It started distribution of newsreels and documentaries from June 1949 and in 1949-'50, as many as 97 shorts, documentaries and newsreels were released by the new outfit. His zest infected young directors and technicians who got into frenzy to film the so-called 'soul of India', lying not only in ancient remnants, customs and traditions but also in the new industrial and agricultural prowess, emerging in Nehru's India. Among their significant films were *Jaipur: Memories of Mewar* by Mohan Wadhwani, *Kumaon Hills* by him, *Holy Himalayas* and *Darjeeling* by K L Khandpur, *Mahavalipuram* and *The Story of Steel* by Jagat Murari, *The Story of Sindri* by V R Sarma and *The Vital Link* by Krishna Gopal. The funeral procession in Mumbai of Sardar Patel who died on 15 December 1950 was shot, printed, added with a running commentary and shown, the same evening, in Mumbai's Royal Cinema- a miracle in those days.

Jean Bhowmagiry

Before Bhavnani's retirement, a UNESCO filmmaker, Jean Bhowmagiry joined the Division in 1954 as Deputy Chief Producer. In the three years of his tenure, he encouraged, as he said, "existing and new talents to probe deeper... to make structured



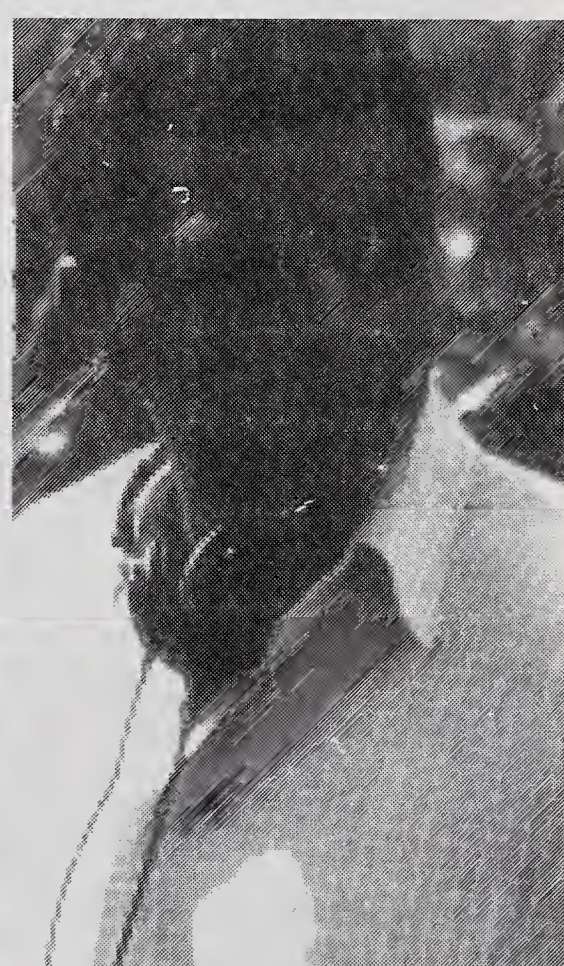
A scene from *Train to Pakistan* directed by Pamela Rooks: based on Khushwant Singh's novel on partition trauma



A still from *Hazar Chaurasi Ki Ma* directed by Govind Nihalani: sensitive depiction of political scenerio



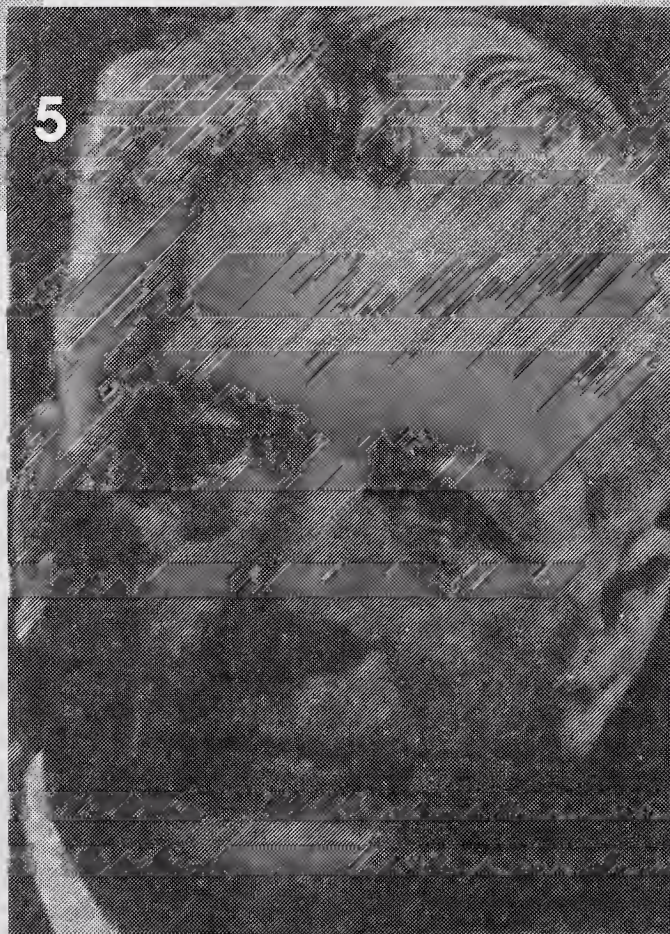
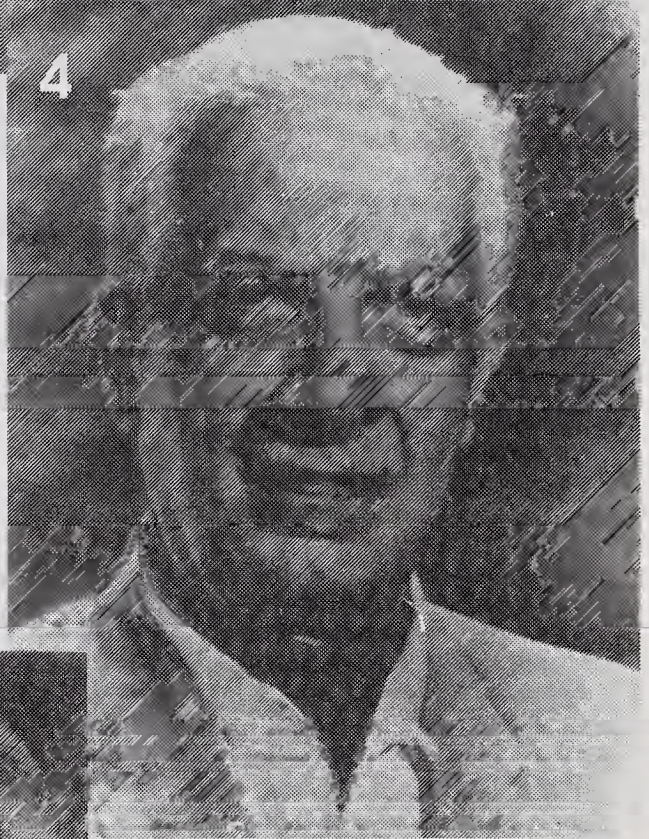
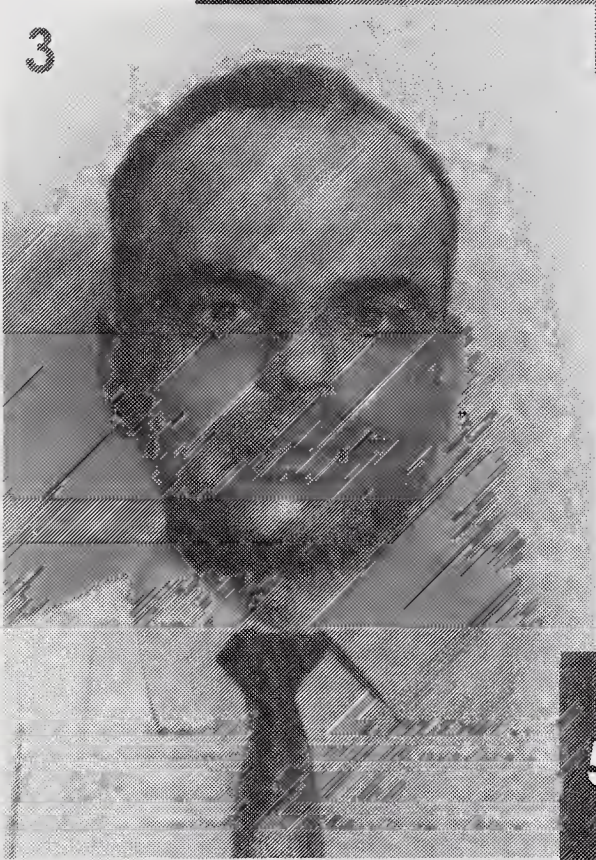
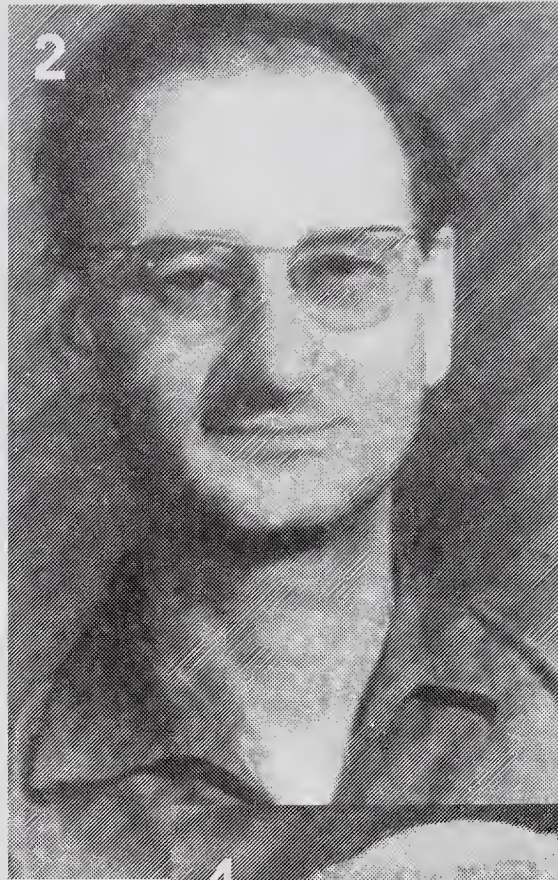
A scene from Urdu film *Muhafiz* directed by Ismail Merchant of the famous Merchant - Ivory Production



Deepa Mehta (extreme left): known for 'elemental' films in India; Mira Nair (center): bold themes and innovative techniques are her forte; Manoj Night Shyamalan (extreme right): dubbed as Hollywood's next great entertainer

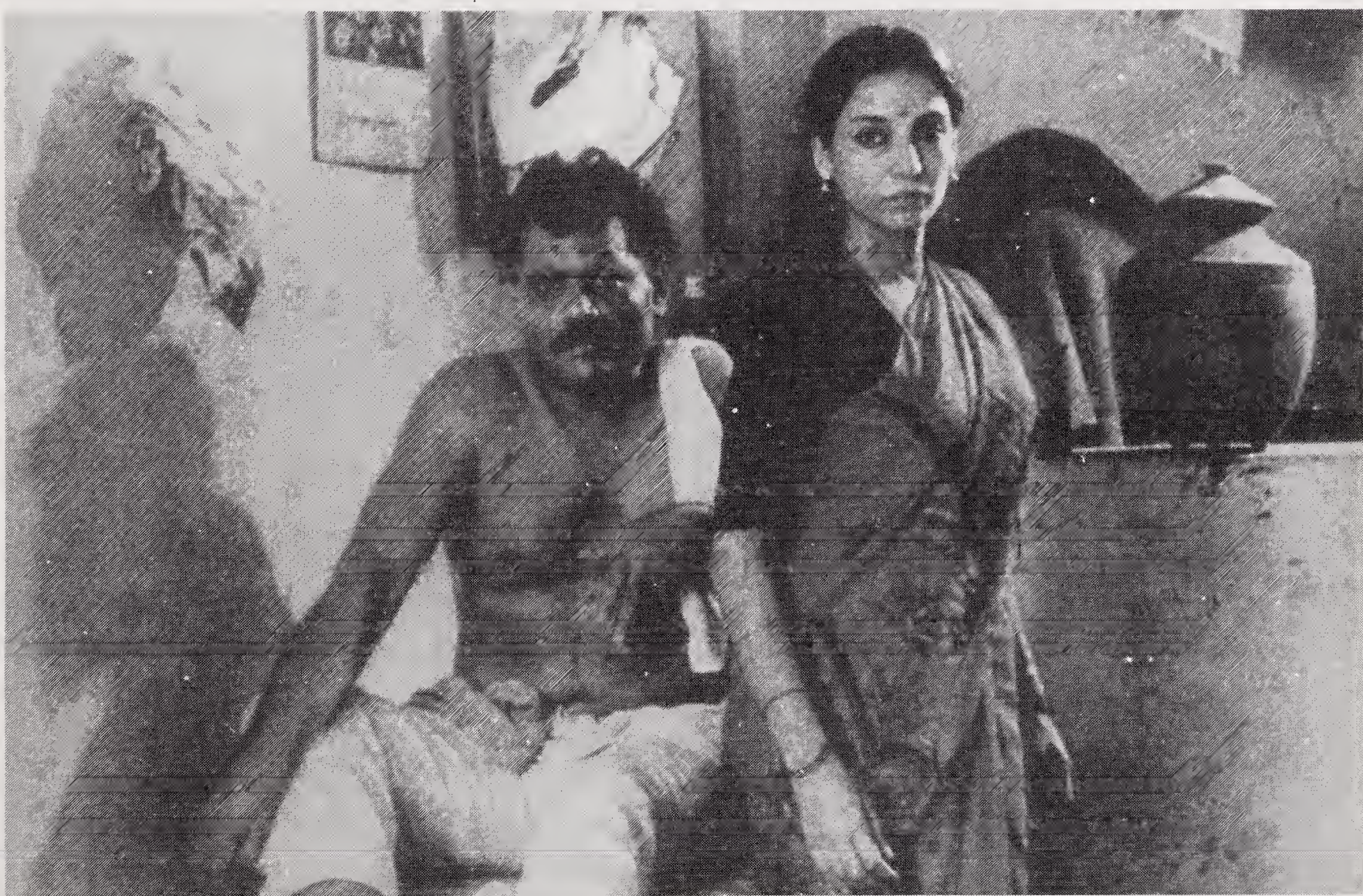


A scene from documentary film *Fearless : The Hunterwali Story* (top) directed by Riyad Vinciwadi ; A scene from short film *I am Twenty* directed by S.N.S. Shastry (above left); Sukh Dev (above right)- pioneer of investigative documentary films

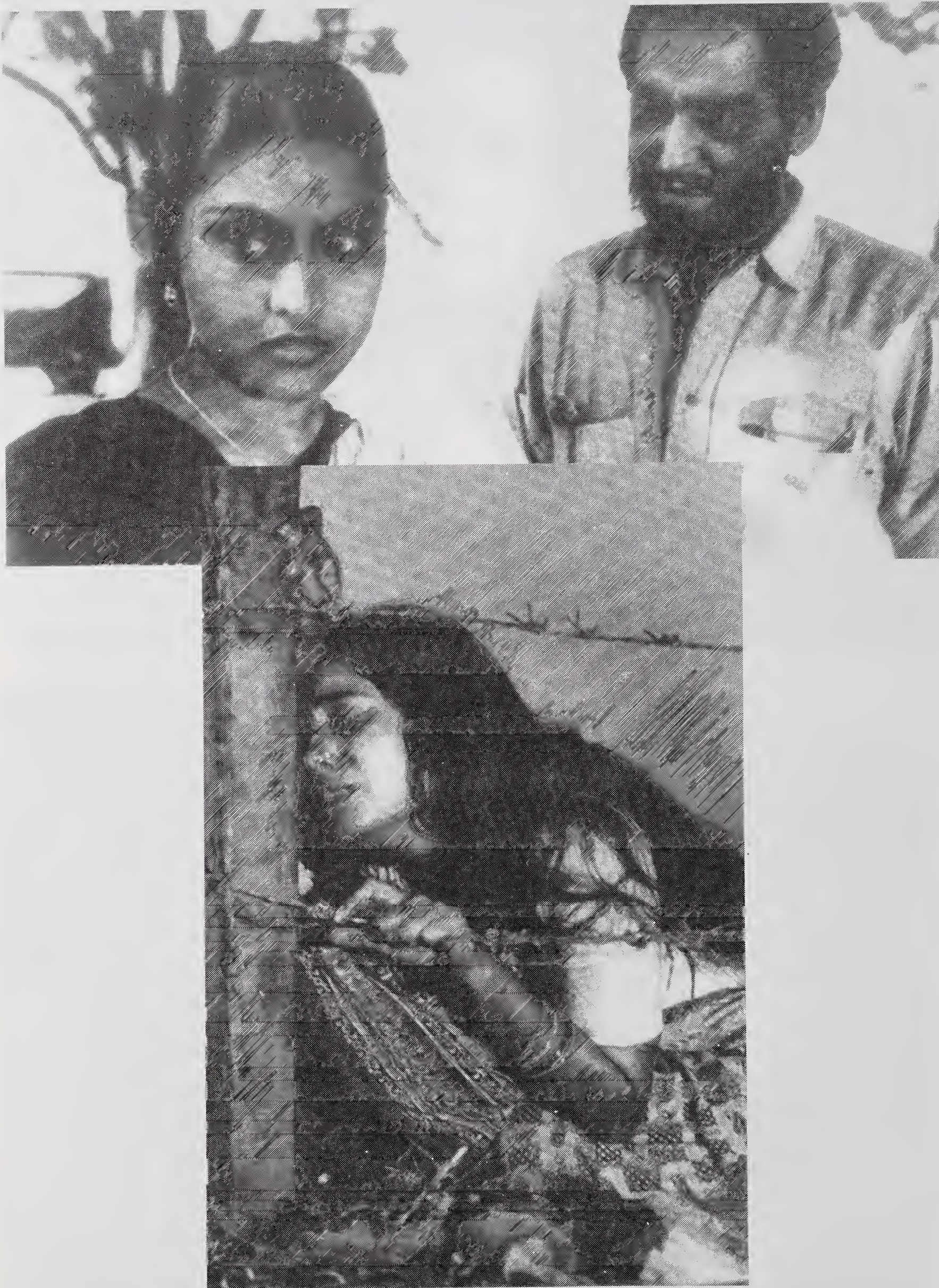


Documentary and Short Film makers :

1. Pramod Pati 2. Jean Bhowmagiry 3. SNS Shastry 4. Ezra Mir 5. Paul Zils



A scene from *Tamas* (top) directed by Govind Nihalani: gripping portrayal of Partition; a still from *Dharavi* (above) directed by Sudhir Mishra: credible depiction of slum life



A scene from Satyajit Ray's *Abhijaan* (top): An effort to fulfill his urge for commercial cinema;
A scene from Utpalendu Chakraborti's *Debshishu* (above): depicting society riddled by social dogmas



A scene from *Daasi* directed by B. Narasingha Rao: poignant tale of a young maid



A still from *Calcutta 71* (above): an essay on silver screen



Govind Nihalani : Ace cameraman turned director known for his visually rich films



Gautam Ghosh : superb handling of social themes

films instead of enumerations of our treasures and achievements". Besides Chari and Shastri, the insiders who reaped this new wind were S Sukhdev, Pramod Pati and K K Kapil for the documentaries, N V K Murthy and Prem Vaidya for the Newsreels and G K Gokhale, Ram Mohan and Bhim Sain for the animation films. Significant among their releases, apart from those already noted, were *Report on Drought, Actual Experiences* (in two parts) on family planning, and *Akbar* by Bhowmagary himself (based on miniature paintings). His special emphasis was on art films. His own *Radha & Krishna* got a series of national, and two foreign, awards (Berlin & Santiago). Wadhwani's *Khajuraho* was awarded at Manila. Bhowmagary gave each director ample scope to develop his theme and style, instead of compressing everything in one or two reels. Neil Gokhale's '*Mandu-The City of Joy*' combined poems with other sound effects to recreate the old city. The ambience improved 'independent' filmmaking too, with releases of such good documentaries like *Cloven Horizon* (Kantilal Rathod), '*And miles to go!*' (S Sukhdev), *Through the Eyes of a Painter* (M F Hussain) and *Koodal* (Tyeb Mehta).

Ezra Mir

After Bhavnani's retirement, Ezra Mir became Chief Producer of documentaries in 1956. During his five-year tenure, the Films Division produced over 400 documentaries. Born as Edwin Myers in a Jewish family in Kolkata in 1903, he went for New York in 1924, where he worked in editing and story departments of the Universal. He took to making documentaries, inspired by a wartime series, *March of Times*, using the stock shots lent by the Universal and 20th Century Fox. Among notable documentaries, produced by him are *Voice of Satan* (1940), *The Tree of Wealth* (1949), *River Boats of Bengal* (1940), *Symphony of Life* (1954), *Operation Khedda* (1956), *Taj Mahal* (1958), *Green Heritage* (1959) and *Khajuraho* (1956). The Films Division under him produced biographies, notably on Lokmanya Tilak by Vishram Bedeker and on Dr. Karve by Neil Gokhale.

Paul Zils

Mohan Bhavnani's extensive programmes for the Films Division staff made independent private documentary-makers resentful, because they were making them for the government hitherto. Some independent short filmmakers formed a Short Film Guild on 22nd February 1949, headed by Paul Zils, a German-born (1915) expatriate who was with the UFA Studios (1933-'37) and a favourite of Hitler's propaganda minister, Goebbels. When the War ended, he was given the charge of the *Information Films of India* from 1945 to 1948. After the closure of the IFI, he launched his own unit, *Documentary Films of India* and a quarterly journal, *Indian Documentary* in 1949. It was due to his efforts that the Films Division assigned 16 of their 52 planned shorts to the Guild.

In 1948, Zils made three shorts- *Kurwandi Road* for CIBA, anti-malarial *A tiny thing brings death!* for ICI and *Child* for the UN. Next year, his *Hindusthan Hamara*, based on the Parliamentarian Minoo Masani's *Our India*, featuring 20 stars of Mumbai,

covered India's history in a two-hour docu-feature. He returned to documentary making and set up *Documentary Unit, India* with Falli Billimoria, an associate since the late 1940s, and produced several sponsored short films for Shell, the USIS and the UN. He returned to Germany in 1959 and later in life, made some films on Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

Paul Zils' zest was sustained by Burmah Shell, which had a Film Section, headed by James A Beveridge who was brought over by the multi-national oil company from the National Film Board of Canada. In his five years in the Films Division from 1954, he produced 50 films, running to over 150 reels, some in colour. Beveridge gave full creative freedom to assignee directors. The Technical Cooperation Mission of the International Cooperation Administration of the USA sponsored some shorts on Indian rural milieu, among which notable were *The Etawah Story* (1956) by Dr.P V Pathy on community development, *School* (1956) by Paul Zils on multi-purpose secondary school education, which were instructional in nature.

For making educational films, **Dr. Gopal Dutta**, an audio-visual instructor, was appointed Educational Adviser in the Films Division in the end-1950s. The Division was also entrusted with making children's films under a series, *Children's Magazine*; seven issues of it were released in the 1950s. A Cartoon Film Unit was also set up with assistance from Clair H Weeks, former Key Animator of Walt Disney Studios as a Consultant. Beginning with 'animation inserts', the Unit produced an eight-minute cartoon film in Eastman colour, *The Banyan Deer* on a Buddha Jataka tale. D G Phalke and New Theatres of Kolkata made animation and cartoon films too, respectively. Attempts followed by Prabhat (*Jamboo Kaka*), by M Bhavanani (*Lafanga Langoor*, 1935), by Gemini (*Cinema Kadambari*, 1947) etc. but the Unit in the Films Division made the first exclusive effort to produce them on a regular basis with the help of two renowned animators- **Bhim Sain** and **Ram Mohan**.

Although the 1950s were a 'golden period' for shorts and documentaries by the Films Division particularly, it was felt toward the end of the decade and in the early 1960s, that the Films Division was stuck in a groove, as most of its productions were alike. As B D Garga observed in *Marg* (June 1960), there was "little of the spirit of dynamism, or *avant-garde* in either its technique or treatment". A loss of credibility had crept in, owing to poor perception of the country's political undercurrents and forces. By the mid-1960s, a gradual disillusion was creeping in about the Five-Year Plans. The common people who had to see them unavoidably before the feature films, looked upon them as propaganda, divorced from the reality.

K S Chari

The thinking affected the Films Division also. Between 1965 and 1969, a new kind of films began to be made. K S Chari, then a Senior Commentary Writer gave the lead. In his *Face-to-Face*, he and T A Abraham, an associate, took the microphone out of the studio to the street to record people's voices. He did the same for his next, *Transition* (1967), to mark the 20th anniversary of Independence. His promise was cut short by

premature death before which, however, he compiled a biography of Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan, titled *Khudai Khidamatgar*.

S N S Shastri

A kindred talent was S N S Shastri whose debut for the Films Division was *Nagarjunakonda* in 1958. In keeping with the new ethos, he made *I am twenty!* (1967) on the dreams and desires of the young people who were born in the year of Independence, 1947. Among his notable shorts were *Jai Jawan*, *On the Move* and *This Bit of That India*.

Vijay B Chandra

To save it, a bold insider came, Vijay B Chandra who became the Chief Producer in 1985. He sensed that if the Division had to survive the challenge of television and direct sponsorship, it had to re-orient its role. He gave up competing with Doordarshan in news coverage and realized that with the burgeoning TV, cinema-halls would no longer command wide viewership. He opened the archives of the Films Division to Doordarshan, which found in it an incredible variety of films of every conceivable genre, to keep it going for some time. He got them transformed on videotape and sold them at normal cost. He started holding documentary festivals in State capitals, as common viewers were reluctant to see them in cinema-halls.

S Sukhdev

A new talent thrown out by this *glasnost* was a Punjabi young man, Sukhdev Singh Sandhu. Born in Dehradun to a Sikh farmer of Ludhiana on 1st October 1933, he became an assistant to Paul Zils, when he was studying in Mumbai in 1955. He gave up studies and in 1958, set up *United Film Arts*, when Zils left for Germany, under which he made six documentaries on various subjects, beginning with one on handmade paper, *Wazir the Kaghzi*. His best known documentary is *And miles to go!* (1965), on which the censors imposed a loud soundtrack. Most of his films were made for, and sold to, the Films Division, notably *India 67* (released as *An Indian Day*; in shorter version, *India Today*) in 1967, *Nine Months to Freedom*, *The Story of Bangladesh* in 1972 and *Thunder of Freedom* in 1976- curiously in praise of the Emergency (1975-'77). His style was novel, using a lot of montage and rhythmically associating images including enacted footage, even of himself in *No Sad Tomorrow* and of his family in *After the Eclipse*.

He was a true follower of Grierson, combining style with propaganda, notably in his film on Bangladesh freedom struggle and India's Emergency. Among his early documentaries, *The Saint & the Peasant* was on Vinoba Bhave and *Bhoodan*, *Wazir, the Kazhgi* and *Man, the Creator* were on *Khadi* and other rural industries, *Kaal Udaas Na Hogi* on alcoholism (to which he fell a victim and died in 1979, at the age of 46). Satyajit Ray praised it "for its details- for the black beetle that crawls along the hot sand, for the street dog that pees on the parked bicycle, for the bead of perspiration that

dangles on the nose-tip of the begrimed musician". He came to be known as a maverick, making marvellous shorts and documentaries on topical events and issues, like *A Few More Questions* on the crippling railway strike in 1974, *Behind the Bread Line* on the inadequacies in the public distribution system, *After the Silence* on bonded labour, *Ma Ki Pukar* (1975) on the futility of violence etc.

Among his contemporaries were Kantilal Rathod, (*Adventures of a Sugar Mill*), B D Garga (*Satyajit Ray*) and S Krishnaswamy (*Indus Valley to Indira Gandhi*, almost feature-length). Clement Baptista made a number of un-sponsored films- *Dabbawalas*, *Inquiry*, *1000 AD Khajuraho*, *Apathy*, *Sahawasi* etc.

An altogether new trend is investigative documentary, to expose social ills and problems. The pioneer and a leader in this genre is Anand Patwardhan who, like S Sukhdev, has surprised and shocked with each of his films. The genre has not thrived much in India because of most documentary-makers, receiving government assistance, are reluctant to criticise governments.

Anand Patwardhan

While a student in Boston University, he made his first film, *Business As Usual*. An ardent supporter of Jaya Prakash Narayan, he worked for his movement in Bihar in 1974 and made, secretly, a documentary during the Emergency, *Prisoners of Conscience*, which was shown three years later. Returning to Mumbai from Canada in 1982, Patwardhan made outspoken anti-Establishment shorts and documentaries and set up a mobile cinema unit, *Samvad* to rouse the people through exhibition of his and others' films. He makes multi-lingual sound tracks, e.g. in *Unda Mitterandi Yaad Pyari*, (1989) and *Hamara Shaher* in three and four languages respectively. His other best-known documentaries are *Waves of Revolution* 1975, *Ram Ke Naam* 1992 on the Ayodhya issue, *The Other Side* and *Nahi Amhi Vanar Bannar* in 1993.

He inspired youngsters, among whom **Tapan Bose & Suhasini Mulay** (*An Indian Story, Bhopal: Beyond Genocide*), **Pradip Dixit** (*Daldal*), **Ranjan Palit & Vasudha Joshi** (*Voices from Baliapal*), **Chalam Bennurkar** (*Children of Mini Japan*) are the most remarkable. To reap the whirlwind, even the Films Division produced some investigative films, e.g. *And quietly dies the Vasundhari!* & *The People of Bhiwandi Speak*. Suhasini Mulay (the charming Kutch bellé in *Bhuban Shome*), made a bold documentary on blinding of prisoners in Bhagalpur jail.

Rajbans Khanna

Rajbans Khanna's fame rests on the feature-length documentary, *Gautama Buddha* (1956) for Bimal Roy Productions, to mark the 2500th anniversary of the *Nirvana*; retelling the Lord's life through paintings and sculptures. It was hailed by Jean Cocteau as 'a marvel of marvels from the heart of hearts' and got a special award at Cannes Festival in 1957 for 'exceptional moral and artistic beauty'. Khanna kept this promise

through shorts, like *The river shall not forget!* (aka *The Story of Kashmir*), sponsored by the Ministry of External Affairs, to project India's stand on Kashmir.

Santi P Choudhury

Educated in Presidency College, Kolkata and Glasgow University, Santi P Choudhury took part in British Film Society movement while in U K. He assisted Satyajit Ray in his first three films and in 1958 founded Little Cinema unit in Kolkata to make shorts and documentaries, independent of government support and influencing the younger generation. In a career spanning 25 years (1957-1982), he made some 50 documentaries, notably *Rabindranath's Shantiniketan* (1960), *Rabindranather Chitrakala* (1962) and *Banglar Kabigaan* (1978). He died in 1982.

Harisadhan Dasgupta

While studying filmmaking in the Universities of South California and California (Los Angeles), Dasgupta was an apprentice to Hollywood director, Irving Pichel and witnessed making of some blockbusters. Returning to Kolkata, his home city, he co-founded, with Ray and Chidananda Dasgupta, the Calcutta Film Society on 15th August 1947. He was Chief Assistant to Jean Renoir when he was shooting *The River* near Kolkata. Among his many well-known documentaries are *Konarak*, *The Weavers of Maindargi* (1957), *Fifty Years of Iron and Steel* and *Panchthupi* (both in 1958). He made shorts for Imperial Tobacco, Dunlop and Lipton companies.

P Venkatachalapathy

Pithamandalam Venkatachalapathy gave up research on Telugu theatre to study in Sorbonne (Paris) where he made some shorts under the influence of Cavalcanti. Returning, he worked for Wadia Movitone and made several 'war-effort' films too, for the IFI and Naval Gandhi's *Directorate of Services Kinematography*. With K S Hirelkar and D G Tendulkar, he set up the Motion Pictures Society of India and wielded the camera for several Paul Zils documentaries. His most important newsreel documentary was on the transfer of power by Britain to India on the night of 14-15 August 1947; he was one of the two who shot the historic event on celluloid.

Govind Saraiya

After graduating from Bombay University, Saraiya studied animation at Walt Disney Studios, Los Angeles (USA) and National Film Board of Canada on a UNESCO fellowship. Joining the Films Division, he set up an animation laboratory before quitting it to become an independent short filmmaker. He made over two dozen documentaries, besides making some eight features in Gujarati, of which *Saraswatichandra* (1968) went well on the Hindi circuit.

Fali Billimoria

Fali Billimoria was converted to filmmaking after a chance meeting with Paul Zils

and shot the Congress Sessions of 1947 and 1948 for his documentary Unit, *India*, launched in 1947. His first documentary was *A Village in Travancore* in 1956 for Burmah-Shell, followed by *Land in Bengal*, next year. He shot all Zils productions and when Zils left for Germany in 1958, he launched his own, *Fali Billomoria Production* to make a number of agricultural films for the US Technical Cooperation Missions, to promote fertilizers imported under American PL 480. Also noted was his interview of Prime Minister Nehru in 1958. He co-directed eight shorts with Paul Zils and on his own, directed at least 25 more, notably *Four Families* (1960), *Rivers of Life* (1961), *Comparative Religions* (1962), *Women of India* (1975), *The Ganga Bridge* and his last, *The Anglo-Indians* (both in 1982).

From 1978 to 1989, there was an explosion of shorts and documentaries when a host of younger talents entered the scene. Some came from Pune FTII, some from the mainstream and offbeat genres; the rest were self-taught. Instead of depending on the sponsorship of the Films Division, or big companies, most of them sought patronage from home and foreign TV but mainly from Doordarshan. Various Central and State Ministries directly assigned shorts and documentaries to new entrants, instead of through the Films Division. This made it lose its importance and power and rendered it almost redundant.

Among the new talents in the 1980s were **Nilita Vachchani** (*Eyes of Stone*), **Nalini Singh** (*Election Malpractices in Bihar*), **Yash Chaudhury** (*Frame within Frame*), **P C Sharma** (*Premchand*), **Kuldeep Sinha** (*Taranath Shenoy*), **Arun Gongade** (*A B See*) and **R R Swamy** (*Nirnay*). In the early 1980s, the Films Division began assigning 16-mm rural-based short features to outsiders. One such by **Santosh Sivan**, *The Story of Tiblu* in Idu dialect became a sensation.

In the 1980s, a special project was undertaken to make films for Indian festivals abroad. Thus came *Shanti Parva* on the Indian Festival in the USSR by Bhanumurthy Alur, *An Encounter* on the Festival of France, *Druzhba* on the USSR Festival in India by Kuldeep Sinha and *All for One* on the third SAARC Summit at Kathmandu by **R K Mohan**. There followed a crop of 'Friendship Films' also, like **B D Garga's** *Road to Friendship* on the Indo-USSR ties. The Films Division co-produced Benegal's *Nehru* and **B G Deware's** two adventure films. In all these, Indian and foreign filmmakers and technicians closely collaborated. A new genre was introduced in the end-1970s, the 'agricultural film', made for Ministry of Agriculture, by a separate unit under **K K Kapil**, the Chief Producer.

Independent Documentary-makers

Among other early independent filmmakers for the Films Division was **W H Hese**, a German representative of Zeiss Ikon, who founded AMA Private Ltd. to make instructional, educational and advertising films for sponsors like UNESCO, National Broadcasting Corporation of Japan and Technical Cooperation Mission. Marathi actress, Durga Khote's unit, *Fact Films* produced *Deserted Women* (1958), directed by herself. Another dedicated documentary maker is **Jag Mohan** who also edited the revived the journal, *Indian Documentary*, scripted a number of documentaries and became, in due

course, a major chronicler of documentary movement. He organized the first Documentary Festival in Mumbai and Delhi in 1958.

Other independent short filmmakers were **Vishnu M Vijaykar** and **Clement T Baptista** who were Captains in the Indian Army but being demobbed, formed the Hunnar Films. Jointly, they made *Kabuliram*, *Destination Konkan*, *The Tanners of Jharauta*, *Look at the Sky* and *Lorry Driver*, besides training films for Burmah-Shell and Shell (London and Australia) etc. **Homi Sethna**, also released from the Army, learnt filmmaking in some London Studios under John Grierson, Sir Arthur Elton and Stuart Legg and returning in 1951, became a commentator for the Films Division shorts, before making documentaries himself, like *Stop Rough Handling* and *Gram Safai* for the Division and two veterinary films for the USTCM, all in the 1950s.

Wildlife filming was pioneered by two Punjabi brothers- **Naresh** and **Rajesh Bedi**- who for 30 years have been making films on wild animals, inspired by their father, Ramesh Bedi, a noted authority on medicinal plants. In mid-2001, they planned an ambitious serial on Indian wildlife, *Jungle ke Pukar*.

Among the notable documentaries, made in the 1990s are *Contemporary Indian Paintings* by **K Vikram Singh**, *The Kingdom of God* by **Ranabir Ray**, *The Illustrated Mss. of Assam* by **Ardhendu Bhattacharya**, *Jewel in the Lotus* by **Paresh Mehta**, *Setu* by **Bhim Sain**, *B C Sanyal*-(the Painter) by **Partha Chatterjee**, *C V Raman* by **Nandan Kudhyadi**, *G D Madgulkar* by **Pradeep Dixit** and *India's Rajiv* made for the BBC, in three parts, by actress **Simi Garewal**. Foreign sponsorship made possible **Sanjay Kak's** *Cambodia: Angkor Remembered*, *Bedi Brothers*, *The Ganges Gharial* and *The Snow Leopard* and **Mira Nair's** *India Culture*. **Vishnu Mathur** graduated from the FTII, Pune and assisted Mani Kaul and Mrinal Sen. He joined the Films Division but eventually resigned, complaining lack of freedom. He made three short films and a dozen documentaries, of which conspicuous was *Flying Bird* (1989), an unconventional portrait of the Carnatic *veena*-player, Savithri Rajan.

The documentary genre, despite distribution and exhibition constraints, remained vigorous in the late 1990s. Some of the remarkable documentaries in this period are *History of Terrorism in Jammu & Kashmir* (1999) by **Rahul Jalali**, sponsored by Doordarshan, *The Quest for the Brahmaputra* (1999) by **Jahnu Barua**, a product of joint research by him and journalist Sanjoy Hazarika on the mighty river flowing from Tibet to Bay of Bengal through northeast India and Bangladesh, 13-episode *Indians* (1998) and *Tirupati- A Karmic Debt* (2001) by **Aruna Har Prasad**, focussing on interesting personalities in 27 States and the legendary Hindu temple in Andhra Pradesh respectively, *Kya Jadoo Hai* (1999) by **Shirish** on the singer-legend Kundan Lal Saigal, *1948- A Story of Hyderabad* (1999) by **Lubaina Tyebji** to mark the 50th anniversary of the integration of the Nizam's territory into India, *Something like a War* (1999) by **Deepa Dhanraj**, exposing the faultlines in the Government of India's family planning programmes, awards-winning *Nauka Caritramu* ('Boat Song', 1998) by **Saroj Satyanarayan** on three noted Carnatic musicians- M S Subbulakshmi, D K Pattammal and T Brinda.

So are *Dry Days in Dobbagunta* (1997) by **Nupur Basu** on Pagadala Rosamma, the woman leader of the anti-arrack movement in her village in Andhra Pradesh in 1991, which forced the State government impose prohibition, *Between the Tiger & the Moon* by **Shankar Majumdar** on some Kolkata painters, *The Survival of the Rhino* made jointly by **Tathagata Bhattacharya**, **Anuradha Dasgupta** and **Yayati Bhattacharya**, *Anwasha* (1997) by **Sanghamitra Sarkar** on the *thumri* singers in a red-light area of Kolkata, *Bigyani Jagadish* by **Partha Sarathi Talukdar** on the Bengali scientist, J C Bose whose invention of wireless transmission before Marconi was not recognised and *The Starmaker* (1997) by Lalit Vachani on the hordes of star-struck who flock to Mumbai to land in cinema.

Mention should also be made of the three-hour *The Doyen of Indian Theatre* (1998) by **Raja Sen** on Kolkata thespian, Sombhu Mitra, *Portraits of Belonging: Bhai Mia; Sagira Begum*, both sponsored by Doordarshan on a kite-maker and a woman skilled in *zari* embroidery of old Delhi, respectively, *Shahjahanabad- the Twilight Years, 1850-1947* by **Sanjoy Roy** and **Tanmoy Das** on the decline of old Delhi from splendour to squalor, *Angst at Large* (1999) by Shankar Barua, a disciple of Anand Patwardhan, on the outsiders in love with Assam, *Rashikapriya and Lokapriya* by **Arun Khopkar** on Hindusthani and semi-classical and film music respectively, *Agaria- the Sons of Fire* by **Nandan Sazena** about a vanishing tribe of iron-smelters whose metal was superior to British and Swedish iron, Bengali *Meyeder Katha* (1998) by **Shatadru Chaki** on economic empowerment of rural women in West Bengal, sponsored by the UNICEF and the State government, *The Shamin of Perpang* (1999) by **Mainak Trivedi** on the 'curative' paintings of a vanishing tribe of south Orissa, following mass conversions, *When the soul glows!* (1999) by journalist **Anita Pratap** on Indian dance traditions, focussing on live performances by Birju Maharaj (*Kathak*), Kelucharan Mahapatra (*Odissi*), Sonal Mansingh (*Bharatnatyam*) and others.

In Northeast

The northeast India did not lag behind in making shorts and documentaries. *Sons of Abotani: the Misings* on the art, culture and the problems of the Assamese tribe and the 60-minute *Tale of a River*, both by Karbi pioneer, **Gautam Bora**, *The way I see it!* (1998) by Sussex-based research scholar, **Sangeeta Datta** on India's women filmmakers, based on interviews with them and *Phoolan Devi: the First Rebel* by **Dhruv Kumar** tracing the bandit queen's life from a traumatic childhood to Parliament. Much before Deepa Mehta dealt with lesbianism in *Fire*, **Pratibha Parmar** made *Khush* on the sexual aberration. An interesting documentary trend was started by a Gujarati vegetable-seller woman, **Leelaben** whose *Manek Chowk* focussed on the vegetable and fruit sellers of Ahmedabad. She was trained in video filming by Martha Stuart of New York-based Village Video Network at the instance of Ela Bhatt, the founder of SEWA. She and 20 other trained women made some 400 documentaries, some of which were shown in festivals abroad and awarded.

The documentary movement is aided by various journals, like *The Moving Pictures Bulletin* and *IDPA Update*, a quarterly published by the Documentary Producers' association. The first is a kind of databank on short films and documentaries, made all over the world, published by Television Trust for the Environment (TVE), set up in 1984 by the UNEP and a British TV company. The Bulletins focus particularly on shorts on global awareness of women's rights and how these deal with feminist issues and movements.

Feature Directors' Documentaries

The Films Division could no longer remain the major buyer and maker of shorts and documentaries. A trend set in the 1980s, of feature film directors making short features and documentaries also. **Satyajit Ray** popularised short features- two or three of them forming a full-length film, e.g. *Teen Kanya* and *Kapurush-O-Mahapurush*. He introduced some novelties of form and content also; for example, he began his Tagore documentary from the poet's death. In the one on his father, *Sukumar Roy* (1987), he got enacted several scenes from his humorous, almost surrealistic plays; he himself enacted Tagore's silhouette in the shot of the agitated poet after Jalianwala Bag massacre. Ray's views on documentary are also original. In an article, *The Question of Reality*, he differed with Grierson's famous definition of documentary as 'the creative interpretation of reality'. He said, reality embraces 'subtle and complex human relations and even fables, myths and fairy tales have their prototypes in real life'.

Ritwik Ghatak also made five documentaries and left one incomplete. The completed documentaries are *Adivasiyon ka Jeevan Srot on Oraons*, a central Indian tribe, living near Ranchi and *Bihar ke Darshaniya Sthan* (both in Hindi, for the State Public Relations Department in 1955), *Ustad Alauddin Khan* (1963) on the Hindusthani music maestro, *Scientists of Tomorrow* (1967), *Chhou Dance of Purulia*. He could not complete *Ramkinkar* (1975) on the noted tribal sculptor of Santiniketan, as death intervened. His short films are *Scissors* (1962), *Fear*, *Rendezvous* (1965-'65) for the FTII, Pune, *Amaar Lenin*, *The Question & Yeh Kaun* in Hindi (all in 1970) and *Durbargati Padma*, ('The Turbulent Padma', 1971).

Shyam Benegal has also been a prolific maker of short and documentary films for his employer firms and various other companies and clients. Many of his feature films were also produced by Blaze Films. Among some two dozens of them after *Ankur*, two deserve special mention. One was on Nehru in 1983 and the other- over an hourlong- on Satyajit Ray.

Excellent documentaries were made in the 1950s in Chennai and Kolkata also. **K Subrahmanian**, Tamil director in the Silent Era, set up his own Meenakshi Cinetone with A Chettiar in 1930 and directed notable films, like *Balayogini*. In the 1940s, he produced documentaries for the *Information Films of India*.

Eminent film writer, **Chidananda Dasgupta** made a number of shorts and documentaries, notably *Portrait of a City* (1958) on Kolkata for, and financed by, the

Kolkata Film Society, *Dance of Shiva* on Anand K Kumarswamy, *Ferry*, *Bird Hospital*, *Birju Maharaj* and *Durgapur* till the mid-1970s and during the Emergency, *Zaroorat ki Purti* (1979) which got into some trouble with the Censor Board.

Remarkable among other offbeat directors who also made excellent documentaries are late **G Aravindan** (*Viti* and *The Brown Landscape*, both 1985, *The Seer Who Walks Alone* on J J Krishnamurthy in 1986, *Contents of a Linear Rhythm* 1987, *Anandi Dhara* 1988 and *Sahaja* 1988), **Adoor Gopalakrishnan** (*A Great Day*, 1965, *And Man Created and Danger at Your Doorstep* both 1968, *Towards National STD*, 1969, *Guru Chengannur* 1974, *Past in Perspective*, 1975, *The Myth*, 1977, *Yakshagana* 1979, *The Chola Heritage*, 1980 and *Krishnattam*, 1982), **Girish Karnad** (*D R Bendre*, 1973, *Kanaka Purandaradasa*, 1988, *Lamp in the Niché* (in two parts, 1989), **Muzaffar Ali** (*Pensioners of Avadh*, 1982, *Woodcraft of Saharanpur*, *Venue India*, *Laila Majnu Ki Nai Nautaaki*- all the three in 1982, *Sunchre Sapne & Wah! Maan Gaye Ustad* 1983, *Vadakatha: A Thervad in Kerala*, *Together Forever*, *Wapas Chalo* for Doordarshan and *Kue Yaar Mein*- all in 1984, *Ganga Teri Shakti Apaar*, *India: An Unusual Environment for Meetings* and *Sheeshon Ka Masiha* -all in 1985, four shorts in 1986 and *Khizan* in 1991).

Aribam Syam Sharma of Manipur made a number of documentaries, eight of which were shown in Non-Feature section of Indian Panorama; notable among them are *Tales of Courage*, 1986, *'Sangai: Dancing Deer of Manipur*, 1991, *Keibul Lamjao National Park* and *Koro Kosie* in 1988, *Indigenous Games of Manipur* 1991 and *Laittharaoba*, 1992).

Gautam Ghosh made *New Earth*, 1973, *Hungry Autumn* and *Chains of Bondage*, both in 1976, *Development in Irrigation*, 1981, *Parampara* 1985, *The Land of Sand Dunes* and *A Tribute to Odissi*, 1986, *Ek Ghat Ki Kahani* for Doordarshan in 1987, *Sange Meel Se Mulaqat* 1989, *Mohar* (on Rabindrasangeet exponent, Kanika Banerjee, 1990), *The Bird of Time*, 1991) and the five-hour *Beyond the Himalayas* (1996) on his two-year trek along the ancient silk route across the mountain into central Asia and China. **Shyam Benegal** made *Gher Betha Ganga*, 1962, *A Child of the Streets* and *Close to Nature*, 1967, *Indian Youth*, *Sinshasta* and *Poovanam* in 1968, *Flower Garden*, 1969, *Quest for a Nation* and *Why Export?* in 1970, *Pulsating Giant* and *Steel* in 1971 and six others till his debut feature *Ankur* in 1973 and 22 shorts and documentaries after it, upto 1992, of which notable were *Nehru* (1983) and *Satyajit Ray* (1984), **Biplab Roy Chowdhury** made *The Whispering Wind* and *Latent* (1970) and *Tribals of Singhbhum* 1980); **B Narasinga Rao** made *The Carnival* (1984), *The City* (1985) and *Ma Ooru* 1987. **Mani Kaul** made four shorts and seven documentaries, notably *Homage to the Teacher* (1967), *The Nomad Puppeteers* (1974), *Chitrakathi* (1976) and *Before My Eyes* (1988). From **Kumar Shahani** came *The Glass Pane* (1966), *Manmad Passenger* (1967), *A Certain Childhood* (1969), *Object* (1971), *Fire in the Belly* (1973), *Our Universe* (1976), *Var Var Vari* (1987) and *A Ship Aground* (1989).

Utpalendu Chakravorty made *Mukti Chai* (1977), *Debabrata Biswas* (1983),

Music of Satyajit Ray (1984) and several shorts for Doordarshan. **Ketan Mehta** made *Madhya Surya* and *Coolies at Mumbai Central* (1975), *Experience India* (1977) and *Wat Amari*, a series of films for TV on untouchability and other sociological issues), **Girish Kasaravalli** made *Avasesh*, 1975. **Buddhadev Dasgupta** made *Samayer Kachhe* 1968, *Continent of Love* (1968), *Dholer Raja Khirode Natta* (1973), *Fishermen of Sundarban* (1974), *Saratchandra* (1975), *The Invention of Science* (1980), *Rhythm of Steel* (1981), *Indian Science Marches Ahead* (1984), *Story of Glass* and *India on the Move* (both 1985), *Ceramics* (1986), *Contemporary Indian Sculpture* (1987), *History of Indian Jute* (1990), *The Painter of Eloquent Silence* (1999 and *JorasankorThakurbari* (in which Rabindranath Tagore was born in 1861) in 2002. **Sayeed Akhtar Mirza** made *Corpses*, *Slum Eviction* and *Urban Housing*- all in 1976).

Pankaj Butalia made four documentaries (till 1999) including a very moving one, *Moksha* on the widows of Vrindavan- their poverty and deprivation as they earn their livelihood in the holy town, singing *bhajans* for eight hours a day to get some rice and pulses in return. It was praised in festivals in Switzerland, San Francisco and Hong Kong. Constraints of space do not allow noticing some more offbeat filmmakers who made documentaries and shorts in between feature films to project reality outside a narrative. For her thesis, **Mira Nair** made a two-reel short, *Jama Masjid Street Journal* (1979) on the teeming Muslim community of old Delhi, which was invited to, and awarded in, several US film festivals. This was followed by one documentary- *So far from India* (1982) and two films for American television- *India Cabaret* (1985) about India's cabaret dancers and *Boy or Girl?* (1987); the last is about young couples' craze for amniocentesis of pregnant wives, leading to widespread female foeticides in India. She brings in a documentary element in her feature films to lend them greater credibility.

Short Features

The genre of short features, documentaries and newsreels began in the Silent Era (1899-1934); in fact, the first movie films used to be very short strips, devoted to a single topic or event. It was nourished by many unnamed individuals, thrilled by the invention of movie camera. A prolific contributor to the genre was the 'Father of the Indian Cinema', D G Phalke who made some 30 of them. In the early days of the talkie, short features were generally companions to less than full-length features to give viewers a three-hour treat. Nearly 40 of them were made in Bengali between 1936 and 1948- mostly comedies or musicals. Most other short films by offbeat directors are documentaries.

Among some recent short features are *Summer in my Veins* (1999) by **Nishat Saran**- a short feature on a homosexual Indian filmmaker, *Kichhu Sanlap Kichhu Pralap* (1998), a 95-minute improvised feature on the Bengalees' favourite pastime, *adda* (rambling talk) by **Ashoke Vishwanathan**, *Faqir* (1998) by **Gautam Ghosh** about a honest and hardworking peasant for Doordarshan, award-winning *Jataner Jami* by **Raja Mitra** on a landless peasant aspiring to own one through a government scheme, 80-minute Bengali *Eka* (1998) by **Shankha Ghosh** about three couples of three

generations who come close through paintings of an ageing artist and 30-minute *Sundari* (1999) by **Madhusree Dutta**, inspired by the autobiography of Gujarati stage actress, Jayashankar Sundari.

Non-feature films began to be showcased in the Indian Panorama from 1979 and became a regular feature of IFFIs and *Filmotsavas*, except in 1980, with attendance often thinner than in feature films. The total number of such films, more documentaries than short features, came to nearly 400 in 2003. The largest number of them, 37 was shown in 2000 festival and the minimum, six in 1988. Apart from well-known offbeat directors, many new aspirants could enter their creations in this section. The offbeat director who is most represented in this section whose eight documentaries featured till 2002 is Aribam Syam Sharma of Manipur. Other fairly regular contributors to this section are Anand Patwardhan, Arun S. Gangude, Arun Khopkar with five each, Gautam Ghosh and Prem Vaidya four each, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Mani Kaul, M.R. Rajan, Prakash Jha and Utpalendu Chakravorti and S. Gulzar three each. Two shorts / documentaries each came from G. Aravindan, Kumar Shahani, Girish Karnad, Girish Vaidya (of Films Division), late Purnendu Pattrea and late Shankar Nag. Of committed documentary-makers in the section, the most conspicuous are Putul Mahmood (3), Sanjay Kak (3) and Anjan Bose (2). Remarkable among new comers is K. Vikram Singh whose *Satyajit Ray: Introspections* was last shot in Ray's flat on Bishop Lefroy Road, Kolkata minutes before he suffered a cerebral stroke that incapacitated from filmmaking for nearly five years. Many of these films found no independent commercial release but some telecast by Doordarshan from national and regional channels.

XX. Before the Camera

“Care in casting of actors- professional or non-professional- is a sine qua non of the healthy existence of an avant-garde.” —Satyajit Ray

Offbeat cinema could survive and thrive in unequal rivalry with the mainstream because of a host of talented persons before and behind the camera. A few of them, like Satyajit Ray’s team, initially stuck to the maker and the genre but most swang between the two without any qualm, because offbeat films alone cannot bring their succour. In the beginning, mainstream artistes and technicians were not too keen to work in the offbeat.

To do the wizened auntie’s role in *Pather Panchali* (1955), Ray found an old stage actress, Chunibala in Kolkata’s prime red-light area, Sonagachhi where she lived with her daughter. She was almost forgotten when Ray approached her. She agreed to do the role for a pittance and daily supply of opium pills to alleviate her rheumatic pain. Except Apu’s father (Kanu Bandyopadhyaya), two kind neighbour women and the comical grocer-cum-teacher (Tulsi Chakraborti), virtually every other artiste was a new find whom Ray scouted with pains and much effort. The child Apu came from a school, opposite Ray’s flat in south Kolkata. Apu’s mother, Sarbajaya was a friend’s wife, a former college lecturer of English, Karuna Bandyopadhyaya. Many other offbeat directors also cast non-professionals and introduced new faces to make characters in their films more credible.

Some of these new faces crossed over to the mainstream, e.g. Sharmila Tagore, Smita Patil and Shabana Azmi and Soumitra Chatterjee, to name just a few. Gradually, they became offbeat professionals. Many of them came from the National School of Drama, New Delhi and the FTII, Pune whose intermittent acting course finally ended in 1974. A new generation of persons behind the camera was also produced by the FTII, Pune- cameramen, art directors and sound-recordists etc. who by training and temperament were more innovative than their ilk in the mainstream.

In India, a film becomes a hit not so much for the persons behind the camera as for those before it. It is the so-called ‘stars’ or ‘super-stars’ who generally decide the fate of a film in box-office. As Satyajit Ray said, “One could say with a good deal of truth that the stars came before the stories”. Artistes appearing in feature films generally hail from cities and towns; in the silent and early talkie eras, the actresses came from red-light areas, or from the Anglo-Indian community; it was inconceivable for Hindu housewives to act on stage, or in films.

Many stage-plays inspired early feature films and naturally, acting tended to be theatrical. It is only in offbeat films from the 1950s that the new generation of directors

made conscious effort to de-dramatise cine acting. Despite this, theatrical acting persists in many regional cinemas, particularly Tamil, because of its continuing connection with the stage. Star fees have gone up enormously in the mainstream in Mumbai and Chennai but the same artists charge much less in offbeat films. Miss Aishwarya Rai who charges three crore (30 million) rupees and above for performing in a Hindi blockbuster, took a pittance from the producer of Rituparno Ghosh's *Chokher Bali* (2003). Mainstream artists are lured to perform in offbeat films by stalwarts for a wider exposure; Smita Patil or Soumitra Chatterjee would have remained unknown outside India, if they did no roles in Benegal's or Ray's films. In Mumbai, among the actors in the mainstream who excelled also in offbeat films, Balraj Sahni holds a special niche.

Balraj Sahni

His debut in a cine role came in an offbeat film, K A Abbas's *Dharti Ke Lal* (1946); after performing in eight ordinary films in six years, his most conspicuous performance came in Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zameen* (1953) in the role of an indebted villager who goes to Kolkata to pull rickshaw. These two films paved the way for his phenomenal rise in Mumbai's mainstream cinema. His other striking offbeat role came in M S Sathyu's *Garam Hawa* in 1973. His other notable roles in offbeat and 'middle cinema' came in *Humlog* (1951), *Rahi* (1952), *Garam Coat* (1955), *Taaksaal* and Assamese *Era Bator Sur* (both 1956), *Lal Batti*, *Pardesi* and *Kathputli* (all 1957), *Lajwanti* and *Sone Ki Chidiya* (both 1958), *Chhoti Bahen* (1959), *Kabuliwala* (1961) and *Haqeeqat* (1964), to name the major ones. The last film that he acted in was *Amanat* (1975), released after his premature death in 1973.

Sanjeev Kumar came to be noted through sensitive roles in Gulzar's films, notably *Mausam* and *Aandhi* (both 1975) but his real break in the offbeat came in Satyajit Ray's *Shatranj ka Khiladi* (1977) in the role of a chess-addicted *Nawabs* of Oudh. **Amjad Ali Khan**, who had leapt to fame in *Sholay* (1975) in the role of a dreaded blustering dacoit of Chambal valley, left a moving performance in it in the role of Wajed Ali Shah, the ill-fated ruler of Oudh, whom the British unjustly ousted.

Saeed Jaffrey moved to stage and film acting in Britain after a stint with All India Radio, Delhi as an Urdu newsreader. He brought Ismail Merchant and James Ivory in London together, which led to the launch in 1961 of Merchant-Ivory Productions. Jeffrey acted in well over a hundred English, Hindi and Urdu films, many of them for television—mostly in comedy roles before and after Satyajit Ray cast him in the role of one of the chess-addict *Nawabs* of Oudh who cannot stay away from the game, even when his wife takes a lover and East India Company troops march into Oudh.

Actresses

Sharmila Tagore made her debut at the age of 15 in Satyajit Ray's *Apur Sansar* (1959) as Apu's young wife who dies during childbirth. She did a variety of roles in Bengali and Hindi films over four decades, in many of them matching her elfin beauty

with brain. A great grand-daughter of Rabindranath Tagore's elder brother, she went over to Mumbai in 1963 after appearing in eight more Bengali films, including Ray's *Devi* in 1960. She returned to Kolkata to perform in three more Ray films- *Nayak* (1966), *Aranyer Din Ratri* (1969) and *Seemabaddha* (1971). Notable among the other offbeat and 'middle cinema' films, she acted in are Tapan Sinha's *Nirjan Saikate* (1963), *Kinu Goalar Gali* (1964), *Anupama* (1966), *Aradhana* and *Satyakaam* (both 1969), *Jadu Bansa* and *Charitraheen* (both 1974), *Mausam* (1975), *Grihapravesha* (and 1980), *Kalankini Kankabati* (1981) and *New Delhi Times* (1985).

Waheeda Rehman's memorable offbeat roles came in Ray's *Abhijaan* (1962) as an unlettered upcountry mistress of a *Marwari* businessman and in Basu Bhattacharya's *Teesri Kasam* (1966), as a *Nautanki* dancer in a roving drama troupe, who cannot requite the love of a bullock-cart driver.

Leela Naidu, one of the most highly educated and talented actress in Indian cinema was first noticed in Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Anuradha* (1960) in the role of an accomplished girl who marries a rural doctor out of love; she was then 17, endowed with ineffable beauty and grace. Renoir praised her beauty ("Her skin glows") and brain; she was once described as 'one of the five most beautiful women of the world'. Three years later, she enacted a village girl married to a city boy (Shashi Kapoor) in James Ivory's debut, *The Householder* (1963), which fetched her Mademoiselle Award from France. Apart from acting in three foreign films, she performed in as many Mumbai films too- Ram Dayal's *Baghi* (1964), Nitin Bose's *Ummeed* (1971) and Shyam Benegal's *Trikaal* (1985). She last appeared in Pradip Kishen's *Electric Moon* (1991), made for the BBC's Channel Four.

Rekha's rise to super-stardom in Mumbai is a rags-to-riches story. Born as Bhanurekha to the Tamil artistes- Gemini Ganesan and Pushpavalli, she came to be a rave mainstream actress after several plastic surgeries to improve her features. She performed in offbeat films too with the same felicity, notably in Muzaffar Ali's *Umrao Jaan* (1981), Shyam Benegal's *Kalyug* (1980), Girish Karnad's *Utsav* (1984) and Mira Nair's *Kamasutra* (1996); in the last two, her roles were erotic. She looks alluring on screen and once described herself as 'every man's dream'. In *Umrao Jaan* she played a *tawaif*- a courtesan in 19th century Lucknow- which fetched an award. Her dominant image is of the 'other woman' in a man's life. She is also a good dancer and many mainstream films became roaring success for her enchanting dances. She also excelled as a tomboy in Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Khubsoorat* (1980) and *Jhoothi* (1986).

Rakhee moved between Bengali and Hindi films with equal ease, after making her debut, accidentally, in a Bengali film, *Jeevan Mrityu* (1967) by Hiren Nag. Going over to Mumbai, she featured in a number of films from Rajshri Productions. She is choosy about roles and as she aged, she glided gracefully into elderly characters, very conspicuously in the role of an adulterous wife in Aparna Sen's bilingual *Paroma* (1985).

Jaya Bachchan who made her debut as a school girl (then Jaya Bhaduri) in Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar* (1963) went over to Mumbai to perform in a number of films by

Hrishikesh Mukherjee, Gulzar and others. She married Amitabh Bachchan after playing his fiancé in a Mukherjee film and settled in Mumbai. She returned to acting in an offbeat film, after 16 years, in Nihalani's *Hazaar Churasi ki Ma* (1997) in the role of a stressed mother who awakes to a bleak political reality by probing her son's killing by the police for indulging in revolutionary activities. She also played the title role in Tapan Sinha's *Abhagi* in omnibus *Three Daughters of the Century*, based on a Sarat Chandra Chatterjee story.

From Offbeat to Mainstream

More artistes went over from the offbeat to the mainstream than the other way. Many of them, of course, swung between both the genres, conforming to their respective ethos and styles. In the 1970s, the unexpected box-office success of Mrinal Sen's *Bhuban Shome* (1969) brought in artistes who were trained in stage or cine acting, or both, in the National School of Drama in New Delhi (e.g. Om Puri, Naseeruddin Shah and Seema Biswas) and/or the Film Institute in Pune (e.g. Shabana Azmi), which had started an acting course in the beginning but dropped it, finally, in 1974.

In the 1970s, four very talented artistes- two men and two women- entered Hindi cinema through offbeat films and for some years, were at the vanguard of the genre. Three of them- Naseeruddin Shah, Om Puri and Shabana Azmi- were trained- the first two in the National School of Drama and Shabana in the FTII, Pune. Smita Patil without any training or tutelage left a mark in both offbeat and mainstream.

Smita Patil

She first appeared in a 20-minute diploma film, *Teevra Madhyam* of a FTII student, Arun Khopkar in 1974. Holding a Master's degree in social work, she read Hindi news on Mumbai Doordarshan for a while, when Shyam Benegal, then an advertising executive, cast her in a children's film, *Charandas Chor* (1975). She had already acted in two Marathi films- *Raja Shivachattrapati* (1974) and Jabbar Patel's *Saamna* (1975). She performed superbly in Benegal's three early films- *Nishant*, *Manthan* and *Bhumik*, chiming with her feminist urges, unforgettably in *Nishant* in the role of a landlord's daughter-in-law who mutely witnesses a brutal rape of a local school teacher's wife by her husband and his three brothers. Her next best performance was in the role of a brave and abusive slum widow in Rabindra Dharmaraja's *Chakra* (1980), comparable to Sophia Loren in *Two Women*. Her other sterling performances came in Ketan Mehta's *Bhavni Bhavai* (1980) and *Mirch Masala* (1985), Dr. Jabbar Patel's *Umbartha* (1982), Mahesh Bhatt's *Arth* (1983), Kumar Shahani's *Tarang* (1984), Sagar Sarhadi's *Bazaar* (1982), Mohan Kumar's *Amrit* (1986) and Sisir Mishra's *Bheegi Palkein* (1982).

Her spirited performance in early Benegal's films brought him and her in the forefront of the offbeat genre. Smita was then 21, in the flush of youth; in real life, she was a vivacious woman, deeply attached to her parents who were involved in politics and social work. She used to caress dirty children during outdoor shooting to the horror of

onlookers. After doing offbeat roles for five years at a stretch, she realised that they brought her little money and thematically, were rather repetitive.

She started doing roles in mainstream films, in which she was equally at ease, from *Tajruba* in 1981. The same year, she did one of her career-best roles in Satyajit Ray's short for Doordarshan, *Sadgati*, based on Munshi Premchand's story on a Brahmin's cruelty to a cobbler. She remained in touch with offbeat directors and never refused a challenging role. After performing in Benegal's bilingual, *Kondura / Anugraham* (1977), she appeared, apart from films noted above, in *Sarvasaksh* and *Gaman* (both 1978), K A Abbas's *The Naxalites* (1979), Govind Nihalani's *Aakrosh* (1980) and *Ardha Satya* (1983), Mrinal Sen's Bengali *Aakaler Sandhane*, Saeed Mirza's *Albert Pinto Ka Gussa Kyon Ata Hai*, Benegal's *Mandi* (1983), and in G. Arabindan's *Chidambaram*, Utpalendu Chakraborty's *Debshishu* and Sandip Ray's short for Doordarshan, *Abhinetri*, produced by Satyajit Ray (all in 1985).

In some way or other, her highly acclaimed roles in *Umbarha*, *Chakra*, *Chidambaram* and *Mirch Masala* focussed on the plight of women in India. Smita never acted; she lived the roles, as it were; so intense used to be her identification with them. After a day's hectic shooting, she would weep in her mother's arms to let off pent-up emotion. She inherited, from her parents, a zest for uplift of women, which subconsciously gave zest to her performance. Comparatively, her performance in a series of generally lacklustre films from 1981 was rather contrived.

Her sudden death after childbirth on 14 December 1986 left 21 films incomplete, which were made up and released up to 1989. She had then reached the acmé of her career and came in for high praise by Western critics and Indian stalwarts like Ray, Sen and Benegal. The US critic, Eliot Stein remarked, seeing her films up to 1980,

“At 25, Smita is clearly the queen of Indian parallel cinema, as much an icon for filmmakers of the milieu as was Anna Karina for young directors in France at the outset of the new wave in the country. Patil is not a classic but the lady glows. She never makes a false move on the screen.”

French director, Costa Gavras arranged a Retrospective of some of her films in the French Cinematheque, Paris in 1984. She was awarded *Padmashri* and given national awards for best actress- in *Bhumika* and *Chakra*. She had little craving for money and gave away the cash award of 10 thousand rupees for *Bhumika* to Bhave School where she studied, to *Seva Dal* and to Baba Amte, running a lepers' home.

Shabana Azmi

A rival to Smita and like her, virtually an early icon in offbeat films is Shabana Azmi (born 1950). Her father, lyricist Kaifi Azmi and mother- an IPTA actress- Shaukat Azmi were inclined to the offbeat in theatre and cinema. Smita and Shabana together acted in *Nishant*, *Albert Pinto Ka Gussa Kyon Aata Hai* and most memorably in *Arth*. Shabana made her debut appearance in Benegal's *Ankur* (1973), after which Shyam Benegal cast her in five more of his films- *Nishant*, *Junoon* (1978), *Mandi* (1983), *Susman* (1986)

and *Antarnaad* (1992). Like Naseeruddin, Om Puri and Smita, Shabana also played mainstream roles, beginning with *Ishq Ishq Ishq* in 1974, a year after *Ankur*, most conspicuously in *Amar Akbar Anthony* and *Parvarish* (both 1977).

She left sterling performances in scores of other offbeat films too, in Satyajit Ray's *Shatranj Ke Khiladi*, Mrinal Sen's *Khandhar* (1983), *Genesis* (1986) and *Ek Din Achanak* (1988), Aparna Sen's *Sati* (1989), *Picnic* (1990) and *Juganta* (1996). She also did well in some low-budget films- *Parinaya*, *Swami* and *Kadambari* with strong story-lines and literary flavour. She is the only Indian actress to perform in a number of Western films too, *Son of the Pink Panther* by Blake Edwards, *Madame Sousatzka* by John Schlesinger (with Shirley McLaine), *La Nuit Bengali* (with John Hurt and Hugh Grant), *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *My Son the Fanatic* and in Pakistani *Immaculate Conception* and conspicuously in *The City of Joy* by Ronald Joffe, as wife of a rickshaw-puller in a Kolkata slum which a British doctor tries to ameliorate against odds.

Shabana got a record four national awards for Best Actress for her performance in *Ankur* (1973) and three other films in consecutive years- *Arth*, *Khandhar* and *Paar*- from 1983 to 1985. Chicago Festival gave her the Best Actress award for her role in Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996), an Indo-Canadian production. She is often called 'Vanessa Redgrave of Indian cinema' for her interest in social work, political activism and candid criticism of the government. In 1989, she was given the International Human Rights Award for upholding the causes of the under-privileged in Mumbai. In fact, her growing interest in social work, particularly for slum-dwellers through her organisation, *Nivara Haq*, made the President nominate her as a member of the Rajya Sabha in 1997. She once said, "I have been trained in the Stanislavsky method and I would really like the freedom. Stanislavsky said that an actor should have naivete".

Her other offbeat films include *Junoon* (1978), *Sparsh* (1979), *Albert Pinto Ko Gussa Kyon Aata Hai* (1980), *Mandi* (1983), *Anjumaan* and *Ek Pal* (both 1986), *Susman* (1986), *Pestonjee* (1987), *Disha* (1990) and *Muhafiz / Hifazat* (aka *In Custody*, 1993). In Gautam Ghosh's *Paar*, she played, to worldwide acclaim, the pregnant wife a Bihari farm labour, who along with her husband chases a herd of swine across the swollen *Ganga* for a pittance. Equally moving was her role of an orphan, dumb girl in Aparna Sen's *Sati*, who is married to a tree to ward off predicted widowhood but dies when it is uprooted by a storm. She and Smita Patil were so commonly seen in Hindi offbeat films until 1986 that they seemed to have divided lead roles in the genre between them.

Nandita Das

A promising new find is Nandita Das who came to be noticed in the role of an *ayah* in Deepa Mehta's *Earth* aka '1947' (1996). Daughter of the noted Oriya painter, Jatin Das, she did her Masters in Delhi School of Social Work and taught for a while in Rishi Valley School near Bangalore. Her dusky complexion and 'next-door-girl' look fitted diverse roles in films, two in 1997- in Deepa Mehta's *Fire* and Govind Nihalani's *Hazaar*

Chaurasi ki Ma, followed by five in four languages in 1999- in Kannada *Deveeri* by Kavitha Lankesh, Malayalam *Punaradhivasam* by V K Prakash and *Janma Dinam* by Suma Josson, Oriya *Biswaprakash* by Susant Mishra and Benegal's Hindi *Hari Bhari* and three in 2000 in as many languages- in Bengali *Swapner Sandhaney*, English *Rockford* by Nagesh Kukunoor and K P Sasi's Hindi *Ek Alag Mausam*. She has also veered to perform in mainstream films- *Bawandar* (2000) and *Aks* and in Mahesh Manjrekar's *Pitah* (both 2001), in the latter as wife to the protagonist, played by Amitabh Bachchan. Her most acclaimed performance came in Deepa Mehta's *Fire*.

Seema Biswas

Trained in National School of Drama, Seema Biswas was seen by a very large audience in India and abroad in the title role in Shekhar Kapoor's *Bandit Queen* (1996). She did not squirm to face the camera, wholly naked, in a long shot though, in a sequence in which captive Phoolan Devi is made to bring water from a well without clothes by Thakurs in an Uttar Pradesh village. She did roles in films by Shyam Benegal (*Samar*, 2000), Govind Nihalani and in Amol Palekar's *Kal Ka Admi* (1999), in the last as wife of the Marathi advocate of birth control and family planning, R D Karve (1882-1953). She eventually veered to act in mainstream Hindi films, like *Khamoshi*.

Other Actresses

Deepti Naval, a Punjabi girl of Amritsar brought up in New York, made her debut in a daring offbeat film on adultery, *Ek Baar Phir* in 1980; in the next 15 years, she acted in some 60 Hindi films including some offbeat too. She considers her role in Amol Palekar's *Ankahee* (1985) as her best. Her other 'satisfying' roles came in Buddhadev Dasgupta's *Andhi Gali* and Jagmohan Mundhra's *Kamla* (both 1984), Basu Bhattacharya's *Panchavati* (1986) and *Main Zinda Hoon* (1988) and Jagmohan's *Bawandar* (2001).

Deepa Sahi passed out from the National School of Drama where she performed in many plays by Shakespeare and Tolstoy. After performing in Badal Sarkar's Bengali existential play, *Baki Itihaas*, she braved into cinema and made a mark in Govind Nihalani's *Party* (1984) as a rebel daughter of a socialite, who loves a poor poet, to a tragic denouement. She was inclined to offbeat plays and films from the very beginning, in which her husband, Ketan Mehta of *Bhavni Bhavai* fame supported her. Her best performances came in a sensational TV serial by Nihalani, *Tamas* (1986), later cut down to a film, and in a sleazy prurient role in Ketan's *Maya Memsaab* (1993), an adaptation of Gustav Flaubert's *Madam Bovary*.

Born in Pune, **Rohini Hattangadi** came to be noticed in the role of Mahatma's wife, Kasturba in Attenborough's *Gandhi* (1982); the same year, she did small roles in Mahesh Bhatt's *Arth* and two years later, in Nihalani's *Party* (1984). She also performed in side roles in S A Mirza's *Arvind Desai Haazir Ho!*, *Albert Pinto ko Gussa Kyon Ata Hai?*, Rabindra Dharmaraja's *Chakra*, Mahesh Bhatt's *Saransh* and Utpalendu Chakravorty's *Deb Shishu*. **Dimple Kapadia**, who made her debut appearance in Raj

Kapoor's *Bobby*, did a few offbeat roles in Mumbai, growing up, notably in Kalpana Lajmi's *Rudali* (1993) in the role of a professional mourner of Rajasthan, which brought her the Best Actress award. She was also acclaimed in Govind Nihalani's *Drishti* (1991).

Neena Gupta also took acting course in National School of Drama but veered to Mumbai to be a cine actress. She got the 'best character actress' award for her performance in *Woh Chhokri* (1993), in the role of a deserted wife of a ruthless political leader. She played minor roles in Benegal's *Mandi* (1983) and Girish Karnad's *Utsav* (1985). **Sony Razdan** played cigarette-smoking, high-society moll in Hindi films after returning from England where she studied drama in the Guildhall School of Music and Drama as a teenager. She married director Mahesh Bhatt and at his instance, played the female lead in an English film, 'Such a Long Journey' in 1998 on a Parsi family of Mumbai, facing personal and political turmoil.

After making some half a dozen short features in English abroad, **Nandana Dev Sen** (daughter of Nobel laureate Amartya Sen) made her accidental acting debut in Gautam Ghosh's *Gudia* (1997) in the role of the wife (Rosemary) of a ventriloquist. After acting in some foreign films, she returned to India in 2003 to seek a career in Hindi cinema in Mumbai. **Divya Dutt** of Delhi excelled in three offbeat films- Pamela Rook's English *Train to Pakistan* (1997), Manoj Punj's Punjabi *Shaheed-e-Mohabbat Boota Singh* (1998) and Benegal's Hindi *Samar* (1999). A classical dancer, **Nandini Ghoshal** performed the anarchist hero's lover, Ela in Kumar Shahani's rendering of Tagore's *Char Adhyaya* (1998).

Leading Actors

Naseeruddin Shah and **Om Puri** who became virtual icons in Hindi offbeat cinema, learnt stage and cine-acting in the National School of Drama in New Delhi and FTII, Pune, respectively. Both kept their contact with the stage- their first love. Both were born in 1950- Om Puri in Ambala and Naseeruddin in Barabanki, near Lucknow; both immortalised many roles in Hindi, Urdu and some regional languages too and also in English films abroad.

Naseeruddin Shah

Naseeruddin ignored opposition by his father and relatives to make his first cine appearance in two short features but he came to be noticed in Benegal's *Nishant* (1975). He appeared in five more Benegal films- *Manthan*, *Bhumika*, *Junoon*, *Mandi* and *Trikaal* as well as in Gautam Ghosh's *Paar*, Sai Paranjpe's *Sparsh* (both 1984) and Ketan Mehta's *Mirch Masala*. Both had considerable recognition abroad through films, awarded in festivals. Naseeruddin left splendid performance in character roles in several films of Benegal but in the main stream, he broke this stereotype by doing a variety of roles, even comic, e.g. in Ketan Mehta's *Bhavni Bhavai* (1980) and *Mirch Masala* (1985). His hesitant dialogue-delivery and casual gestures brought out psychological complexities of characters. Other offbeat films that he enriched with lifelike performance

are Govind Nihalani's *Aakrosh*, S A Mirza's *Albert Pinto ko Gussa Kyon Ata Hai*, Ketan Mehta's *Bhavni Bhavai / Andher Nagari*, Rabindra Dharmaraja's *Chakra*, Bapu's *Hum Paanch*- all in 1980, *Umrao Jaan* and *Aadharshila* (both in 1981), Sai Paranjpe's *Katha* (1982), Nihalani's *Ardh Satya*, Mrinal Sen's *Khandhar*, S.A.Mirza's *Mohan Joshi Haazir Ho!* and Ketan Mehta's *Holi*- all in 1983, Vijay Mehta's *Pestonjee* (1987) and Girish Kasaravalli's *Mane*. His most telling performance, applauded world-wide, came in Ghosh's *Paar* (1984) in the role of a Bihari labour. Equally superb was his performance in Mehta's *Mirch Masala* (1985) as an overbearing Subedar, lusting for a village woman. He made a remarkable foray in T V Chandran's Malayalam *Ponthan Mada* (1993). He surprised the industry and the media by openly condemning offbeat films, as lacking in substance and repetitive, to justify his 'defection' to the mainstream cinema. He performed in some foreign films too. Peter Brook of *The Mahabharata* fame, cast him in the role of Rosencrantz, a university friend of Hamlet, in a remake of Shakespeare's play, *Hamlet*, in which he gave a three-minute speech in Greek, which Brook told him to learn phonetically without understanding.

Om Puri

Om Puri came from an actors' family; his two elder brothers- Shiv and Amrish- were big names in Hindi mainstream when he made his debut in B V Karanth's *Chor Chor Chhupja* in 1975. His first striking performances came in Mani Kaul's *Ghasiram Kotwal* and Benegal's *Bhumika* (both in 1976). His first exposure to an international audience came through Govind Nihalani's debut, *Aakrosh* (1980) in the role of a mute tribal who kills his wife after she is raped by some revellers in a forest bungalow and a sister, lest she be also victimised. Another peak came in Nihalani's *Ardh Satya* in 1983 in the role of a police sub-inspector who kills a petty thief brutally (a moment is captured on the back cover of this book) to extract confession and later a wily politician for not keeping his promise to save him from public wrath. His two other acclaimed roles were as an untouchable cobbler in Satyajit Ray's *Sadgati* (1981) for Doordarshan and as a Pakistani Hindu, fleeing from communal orgy with his pregnant wife on a cart which he pushes all the way to India, in Nihalani's TV serial- later a film- *Tamas* (1987). His other offbeat roles came in *Ghasiram Kotwal* and *Bhumika* in 1976, *Arvind Desai Ka Ajeeb Dastaan* (1978), *Bhavni Bhavai*, *Albert Pinto Ka Gussa Kyon Aata Hai?*, *Kalyug*, *Shodh* and the Punjabi hit, *Chan Pardesi* (all in 1980), *Aarohan & Chokh* (1982), *Mandi & Holi* in 1983, *Party*, *Tarang* and *Paar* (all in 1984), *Mirch Masala*, *Debshishu* and *New Delhi Times* (all in 1985), *Susman & Genesis* in 1986, *Disha* and *Ghayal* in 1990, *Narasimha* (1991), *Patang & Muhafiz / In Custody* (1993), *Drohakaal* (1995), *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro*, *Bollywood Calling* (2000). He changed track to act in a host of mainstream films too, starting with Kamalahasan's *Chachi 420* and carrying on in megahits, like *Dulwala Dulhan Le Jayenge*, *Pyar to Hona Tha* and *China Gate*.

Apart from some 130 Indian feature films and television serials, he also performed in nine foreign films (till 1999), of which the better-known are Ronald Joffe's *The City of Joy*, as a rickshaw-puller and Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* (1982) as an angry

slum-dweller who wanted to avenge his son's killing in post-Partition riot in Kolkata. His other roles in foreign films came in *Burning Seasons*- a Canadian film, BBC's *Brothers in Trouble* (1995), *Wolf* (1996) by Mike Nichols, co-starring with Hollywood celebrity, Jack Nicholson, *East is East* (2000) by an Irish director, Damein O'Donnell and in the British film, *Parole Officer*. He was felicitated in Telluride Film Festival at Colorado, USA in September 2001 for his performance in Merchant-Ivory's *The Mystic Masseur* (2001), based on V S Naipaul's novel. His pockmarked face, deep-set eyes, muscular build and baritone voice enlivened many tough-guy and soft roles in both offbeat and mainstream films, in which he was utterly convincing. Om Puri played more offbeat roles than Naseeruddin Shah but had no qualm in acting in mainstream films too.

"No, I have no hesitation about acting in what is known as commercial cinema. I act in them with the same sense of commitment that I have for serious cinema. Even though I have compromised with the artistic motif in joining the commercial arena, I have been criticising these films and still opt to work in that section. I don't feel guilty about it."

Other Actors

Amol Palekar was an *avant-garde* director on Marathi stage before appearing in hero's roles in and Marathi and Hindi films. He made his acting debut in Marathi *Shantata! Court Chalu Aahe* (1971) and in Hindi, three years later, in the role of a bank clerk in Basu Chatterjee's *Rajanigandha* (1974). He did similar parts of blundering lover in a host of Marathi and Hindi comedies, notably in Hrishikesh Mukherjee's. His suave and delectable performance made many mediocre and his own two films memorable- *Akriet* (1981) and *Ankahee* (1984). His other acclaimed roles came in *Chhotisi Baat* (1975), *Chit Chor* (1976), Benegal's *Bhumika* (1976), *Kanneshwara Rama*, *Safed Jhoot* and *Gharonda*- all in 1977, *Solva Sawan* (1978), *22 June, 1897* (1979), K G George's Malayalam *Kolangal* (1980), Kumar Shahani's *Tarang* and Tapan Sinha's *Aadmi aur Aurat* (both in 1984) and a host of Bengali films- *Mother* (1979), *Kalankini* (1981), *Abasheshe* (1985), *Chena Achena* (1983) etc. Commenting on his style, he told an interviewer in 2000, "My endeavour throughout my acting career has been, to be as effortless as possible, as non-intrusive as possible, to give portrayal of a person who is the kind of person you may meet here".

Kulbhushan Kharbanda was a busy stage actor in Delhi and acted in 'hundreds of plays-around twice a week' for early Doordarshan before making his cine-acting debut in *Nishant* (1975) by Benegal who cast him in crucial roles in his four more films- *Manthan*, *Junoon*, *Kalyug* and *Mandi*. Another splendid performance came in in Buddhadev Dasgupta's Hindi *Andhi Gali* (1985) in the role of a absconding extremist who giving up his revolutionary ardour, joins the rat race for material advancement. One of his early roles was in Mahesh Bhatt's *Arth* (1982) - of a fashionable filmmaker who deserts his wife (Shabana) for an actress (Smita) who eventually goes mad. He also switched over to mainstream roles, notably in *Ram Teri Ganga Maili*, *China Gate* and 'Refugee'.

Mithun Chakravorty made his debut appearance in Mrinal Sen's *Mrigaya* in 1976, in the role of a tribal hunter, falling prey to colonial injustice. He went over to Mumbai immediately afterward, to act in a plethora of Hindi films, often B-grade. He returned to some offbeat roles, e.g. in K.A. Abbas's *The Naxalites* (1979), Bapu's *Hum Paanch* (1981) and in Buddhadev Dasgupta's *Tahader Katha* (1993) and the pious role of the Bengali saint, Shri Ramakrishna in G.V. Iyer's *Swami Vivekananda* (1999).

Pavan Malhotra came to be noticed in Buddhadev Dasgupta's *Bagh Bahadur* (1989) in the role of a tiger dancer and in the same year, in the title role in S A Mirza's *Saleem Langde pe Mat Ro* (1989). He kept up his promise in Gautam Ghosh's short, *Fakir* (1998) and in Udayan Prasad's 'crossover' film, *Brothers in Trouble* for BBC 2, which was also shown in London, Berlin and San Francisco festivals and some European cities. He did well in some television serials too, e.g. *Nukkad*, *Manoranjan* and *Intezar*.

In the 1990s, after the sudden death of Smita Patil, defection of Om Puri and Naseeruddin Shah to the mainstream and Shabana Azmi's involvement in NGO activities for slum improvements, there was a talent vacuum in Mumbai, which began to be filled up with the entry of Rajit Kapoor (*Charachar*, *Ek Alag Mausam*), Nirmal Pandey (*Bandit Queen*), Dinesh Thakur (*Anubhav*, *Rajanigandha*), Paresh Rawal (*Sardar*) and Rahul Bose (*English August*, *Mr. & Mrs. Iyer*) and Smriti Mishra (*Jaya Ganga*, *Train to Pakistan*) etc.

As the 20th century drew to a close, a new trend was noticed among leading offbeat filmmakers in Mumbai; they veered to cast brawny mainstream heroes and pretty belles in their brainy films. Govind Nihalani cast Ajay Devgan and Tabu in *Thakshak* (1999); Shyam Benegal cast Karisma Kapoor in *Zubeida* (2001) and Aruna Raje chose Pooja Batra and Raveena Tandon for *Khajuraho*. Similarly, Prakash Jha went for Madhuri Dixit in his *Mrityudanda* and Kalpana Lajmi got Raveena Tandon to play the lead role in *Daman*. Even a committed offbeat director like Rituparno Ghosh signed Miss World Aishwarya Rai in *Chokher Bali*. These filmmakers affirm, not very convincingly, that casting these mainstream stars and auperstars, they are not defecting to the popular genre; they merely want to erase the 'unnecessary distinction' between the so-called art and commercial films. As Nihalani says, "This process is not a compromise. Cinema is a live medium and such a trend, if it can be called one, is just a matter of adapting to the times".

Artistes In Bengali Offbeat Cinema

In Bengali offbeat cinema, actors and actresses swung between offbeat and mainstream films, because there was not money enough in the offbeat genre.

Soumitra Chatterjee

Born in 1935 in Kolkata, he has been the choicest hero in offbeat and many

mainstream films; he was Ray's favourite and acted in as many as 15 of his films- short features and documentaries included. The most celebrated of these was in his debut cine role at the age of 23, of young Apu in the third part of the eponymous trilogy, *Apur Sansar* ('The World of Apu', 1959); it was repeated in Ray's subsequent 12 major films, notably *Devi* ('The Goddess' 1960), *Abhijaan* ('The Expedition', 1962), *Charulata* (1964), *Aranyer Din Ratri* ('Days and Nights in the Forest', 1970), *Ashani Sanket* ('Distant Thunder', 1973), *Sonar Kella* ('The Golden Fortress', 1974), *Hirak Rajar Deshe* ('The Kingdom of Diamonds', 1980), *Ghare Baire* ('The Home and the World', 1983), and *Shakha Prashakha* ('Twigs and Branches', 1990). He appeared in many other offbeat and mainstream films too as well as in many so-called 'middle cinema' of Tapan Sinha, Tarun Majumdar etc. as he began to age, he glided gracefully into middle-aged and old men's roles in many offbeat and riffraff films with equal aplomb. A documentary, *Gachh* ('Tree', 2000) was made in France about his performances in Bengali offbeat cinema, notably in Ray's films. He has been also a success on the stage, co-edited a literary quarterly and unlike his one-time rival, Uttam Kumar, won many prestigious honours like 'Lifetime Achievement' awards by *Filmfare* magazine in 1995 and by Napoli Festival in 1999. In 1990, Indian Post released a special envelope to mark 30 years of his cine acting.

Utpal Dutt

More well-known outside West Bengal as a comedy actor in cinema than a filmmaker and a stage celebrity, Utpal Dutt featured in some 214 films in Bengali, Hindi and English. He was a favourite of Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen and Ritwik Ghatak and did main or side roles in Ray's *Jana Aranya* (1975), *Joi Baba Felunath* (1978), *Hirak Rajar Deshe* (1980) and *Agantuk* (1991), in Sen's *Bhuban Shome* (1969), *Ek Adhuri Kahani* (1971), *Calcutta '71* (1972), *Chorus* (1974) and *Chaalchitra* (1981) and in Ghatak's *Jukti Takko aar Gappo* (1974). In Hindi cinema, he is most memorable in Hrishikesh Mukherjee's uproarious comedies. His last role came in Gautam Ghosh's *Padma Nadir Majhi* (1992). He had certain mannerisms of speech which endeared him all the more to the audience. His career-best roles came in Sen's *Bhuban Shome* as a senior railway officer out on duck-hunting in Rann of Kutch, as a Marwari smuggler in *Joi Baba Felunath*, King of Diamond in *Hirak Rajar Deshe*, globe-trotting uncle in *Agantuk* and as Hussain Mian in *Padma Nadir Majhi*.

Others

Of the host of second-generation offbeat actors in Kolkata, **Ranjit Mallik**, **Dipankar Dey** and **Subhendu Chatterjee** did extremely well. They did small roles in Satyajit Ray's later films- Shuvendu in *Aranyer Din Ratri* (1970) and two others in *Shakha Prasakha* (1990). Ranjit Mallik made his debut in Mrinal Sen's *Interview* (1970) and also acted in an episode in his *Calcutta '71*. He then veered to acting in middle and mainstream cinema in generally romantic and macho roles till 1990 when Ray cast him in a moody role in his film on corruption, *Shakha Prasakha*. Subhendu Chatterjee played

one of the four Kolkata young men who go to a forest to unwind. Dipankar Dey played the suspicious husband in Ray's autobiographical *Aagantuk* (1991).

Many performers in side roles are unforgettable too, e.g. **Tulsi Chakravorty** in Ray's *Pather Panchali* (village teacher), *Paras Pathar* (office clerk who gets rich through use of touchstone), **Dhritiman Chatterjee** in Ray's *Pratidwandi* and *Ganashatru*, **Kamu Mukherjee** in Ray's *Nayak*, *Sonar Kella*, *Joi Baba Felunath* and in Sandip Ray's *Phatikchand*, **N. Viswanathan** and **Arun Mukherjee** (in *Kanchanjungha*) and **Bankim Ghosh** as paper merchant in *Charulata*.

Actresses

The two best lead actresses in Bengali offbeat, popularised by Ray and other directors are **Aparna Sen** and **Madhavi Mukherjee**; both of them acted in a host of middle and mainstream films too but never severing with offbeat films.

Aparna Sen made her first appearance as a tomboy in Satyajit Ray's *Samapti*, a Tagore story, included in the three-in-one feature in Tagore's birth centenary year, *Teen Kanya* ('Two Daughters' abroad, 1961). She performed in three more of his films- *Aranyer Din Ratri* (1969), *Jana Aranya* (1975) and his short for French TV, *Pikoo* (1980). Mrinal Sen cast her in *Akash Kusum* (1965) and then followed a hectic career in all kinds of films, on wide screen and television. She acted in over 70 Bengali films- both good and offbeat- like *Aparachita* (1969), *Bombay Talkies* (1970), his father, Chidananda Dasgupta's 's *Bilet Pherat* (1972) and *Amodini* (1995), *Jadu Bansa* (1974), her own *Paroma* (1985) and *Paromitar Ek Din* (1999), Rituparno Ghosh's *Unishe April* Mrinal Sen's two more films- *Ek Din Achanak* (1988) and *Mahaprithivi* (1991). She also played lead roles in three Merchant-Ivory films in English, notably *Guru* (1969).

Madhavi Mukherjee (later Chakravorti) was a great favourite of Ray (who was secretly in love with her) and attained classic status for doing the title role in *Charulata* (1964) and two more of his films- *Mahanagar* (1963) and *Kapurush* (1965). Equally moving was her performance in Mrinal Sen's *Baishe Shravan* (1960) as the young wife of a railway hawker. Her performance in a host of near-offbeat and middle Bengali cinema, recently of older women, e.g. *Streer Patra* and *Malancha* by Purnendu Pattrea, *Dibaratrir Kavya*, *Shankhabela* etc. made them memorable. Her forté is a rare sensitivity and depth of emotional response which few other Bengali actresses except Suchitra Sen equalled.

Mamata Shankar, daughter of Uday Shankar, is a favourite of Mrinal Sen and Bengali offbeat directors for her dancing and acting acumen. She is memorable in Ray's *Gana Shatru* (1988), *Shakha Pasakha* (1990) and *Aagantuk* (1991), Sen's *Mrigaya* (1976), *Oka Oorie Katha* (1977), *Ek Din Pratidin* (1979), *Kharij* (1982) and Gautam Ghosh's *Dakhal* (1981).

Alakananda Roy, then a student in Presidency College, left a mark in the role of the industrialist's daughter in Ray's *Kanchanjungha* (1962), bade goodbye to cine-acting

but returned late in life to perform in television serials from Kolkata. **Uma Dasgupta** and **Shampa Banerjee** were memorable as Durga in *Pather Panchali* but did not return to cine-acting. Ms. Banerjee became a film writer, later in life. Performers in many small and side roles were memorable, e.g., **Reba Devi** and **Aparna Devi** (neighbours' wives in *Pather Panchali*), **Ranibala** in *Aparajito* and *Paras Pathar*, **Padma Devi** in *Jalsaghar*, **Chaudana Banerjee** (waif girl in *Post Master*), **Kanika Majumdar** in *Monihara*, **Geeta Dey** in *Samapti* (both in *Teen Kanya*), **Gitali Roy** in *Chiriyakhana* (1967) and as Mandakini in *Charulata*, **Sumita Sanyal** as actress-aspirant in *Nayak*, **Ruma Guha Thakurata** in *Abhijaan* and *Ganashatru*, **Kaveri Basu** and **Simi Garewal** in *Aranyer Dinratri*, **Arati Bhattacharya** in *Jana Aranya*, **Paramita Choudhury** in *Seemabaddha*, **Bobita** (of Bangladesh) and **Sandhya Roy** in *Ashani Sanket*, **Swatilekha Chatterjee** (a noted stage actress), **Jennifer Kapoor** and **Gopa Aich** in *Ghare Baire*. Constraint of space does not permit mentioning many more in others' films.

Of youngsters in Bengali cinema, **Indrani Haldar** did well in many offbeat films, notably in Rituparno Ghosh's *Dahan* (2002), Buddhadev Dasgupta's *Charachar* (1995) and much more strikingly in NRI Anjan Das's *Sanjhatir Rupkathara* (2003) in the role of an amateur painter's daughter who revives her father from depression after being caught by his wife while having a steamy sex with an admirer family friend. She got the President's award for 'Best Actress' for 2002 for her performance in *Dahan*. She has appeared in over 60 Bengali films, mostly mainstream, notably in *Swet Patharar Thala* (1992).

Her contemporary, **Rituparna Sengupta** excelled in many mainstream films, mostly riffraff but rose to occasion in some offbeat films too, notably in Aparna Sen's *Paromitar Ekdin* (2001) in the role of a young woman who walks out of an unhappy marriage to carve out a career outside. Aparna Sen's daughter, **Kankana Sen** made her adult debut in a Delhi journalist's first Bengali film, *Ek Je Achhe Kanya* ('Once there was a girl.') in a Lolita-like role of a teenaged girl who develops an infatuation for an elderly man, a tenant in her house in Delhi. She did a small role, at 14, in her grandfather's film, *Amodini* (1995), apart from two smaller roles at the age of three and ten.

Major Artistes in South

In four south Indian language cinema- Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam- there have been few artistes thrown up by, and dedicated to perform in, offbeat films, like Om Puri, Naseeruddin Shah, Smita Patil and Shabana Azmi in Hindi and Soumitra Chatterjee and Madhabi Mukherjee in Bengali cinema, at least early in their career. In south India, the genre virtually began in Kannada with Pattabhi Rama Raddy's *Samskara* (1970) with artistes like Girish Karnad, P. Lankesh and Snehlata, Reddy's wife.

Girish Karnad

Besides directing stage-plays and films in Kannada and Hindi and compering television programmes, Girish Karnad performed in his own and others' offbeat films.

Among his own films, he acted only in *Cheluvi* (1992) but in many other outstanding Kannada films he did lead roles, e.g. *Vamsa Vriksha* (1971). After a brilliant career in Oxford University on a Rhodes scholarship, he rejuvenated Kannada theatre by writing and performing in a number of plays and his varied interests saw him in roles outside the stage and cinema- as the first director of the autonomous FTII Pune, Presidents of Karnataka State Nataka Akademi and of the national Sangeet Natak Akademi, Delhi.

Of over 40 films that he acted in, many are also in the mainstream; his offbeat roles came in a host of Kannada and Hindi films as well as one each in Bengali and Assamese. In Hindi, he played major roles in Shyam Benegal's *Nishant* and *Manthan*, Basu Chatterjee's *Kanakambara* and *Swami* (both 1976), Dr. Jabbar Patel's Marathi / Hindi *Umbartha / Subah* (1981), Jahnu Barua's Assamese / Hindi *Aparoopo / Apeksha* (1982), Kumar Shahani's *Tarang* (1984) and Shankar Bhattacharya's Bengali *Aswamedher Ghora*.

Sathyan

Malayalam megastar, Sathyan was a favourite of Ramu Kariat who cast him in the role of a delinquent youth in his *Mudiyanaya Puthran* (1961) and that of an orphan fisherman in *Chemmeen* (1965), who fought with a shark in a raging sea and died in a whirlpool and in his 1963 *Moodupadam* (1963). Other offbeat films in which he left sterling performance include *Neelakuyil* (1954), *Unniyarcha* (1961) and in a host of films by K S Sethumadhavan (*Odeyil Ninnu* and *Daham*, both 1965, *Adimagal*, 1969, *Vazhve Mayam* and *Aranazhikaneram*, both 1970, *Oru Penninte Katha* and *Anubhavgal Palichakal*, both 1971), with whom and M O Joseph he formed a production company, 'Manjilas Films'.

Bharat Gopi

Bharat Gopi (full name V. Gopinathan Nair) made his debut in Adoor Gopalakrishnan's first film, *Swayamvaram* (1972) and continued to act in a host of offbeat films, notably Adoor's *Kodiyettam* (1977), G. Aravindan's *Thampu* (1978) and *Chidambaram* (1985), P Padmarajan's *Peruvazhiyampalam* (1979), V R Gopinath's *Greeshamam* (both 1980), B G Bharathan's *Ormakkayi* and *Marmaram* (both 1982), K G George's *Yavanika* (1982), *Adaminte Variyellu* (1983), *Lekhayude Maranam Oru Flashback* (1983) and *Irakal* (1985), Lenin Rajendran's *Meenamasathile Sooryan* (1985). He also acted in two well-known Hindi offbeat films- Mani Kaul's *Satah se Uthata Admi* (1980) and Govind Nihalani's *Aaghat* (1985); in the latter in the role of a corrupt trade union leader. He is unforgettable in the role of the conscience-stricken Estate Manager in a rubber plantation who had illicit sex with a labour's wife (Smita Patil) and ran, like a haunted man, to Chidambaram temple, where she finds her a begging widow after her husband commits suicide in shame. He was noted as a stage actor, discovered by the director of Trichur School of Drama, G Shankara Pillai. He had to give up cine-acting after a mild paralytic stroke in the late 1980s.

Mammootty

Born as Mohammed Kutty in 1953, Mammootty has become Kerala's all-time greatest actor by acting in nearly 300 films, second most prolific performer after Prem Nazir (1928-1989). He came to limelight in the offbeat films of K G George- *Mela* (1980) and *Yavanika* (1982). He is equally at ease in both mainstream and offbeat films and has become virtually the ultimate in 'masculine power and elegance'. One of the most awarded Indian actors (five times State and *Filmfare* and three national), Mammootty became known all over the country for his life-like rendering of Dr. B R Ambedkar in the eponymous film by Dr. Jabbar Patel.

Among his performances in offbeat films, the most awesome was in the role a cruel and whimsical feudal lord in Adoor Gopalakrishnan's *Vidheyan* (1993). He did an almost opposite character of a rural simpleton in T V Chandran's *Ponthan Mada* (1994). He performed in a host of films by K G George, I V Sasi, P G Viswambharan, Satyan Anthicad and Joshi. The two national awards for best actor came his way for performance in Adoor Gopalakrishnan's *Mathilukal* (1989) and *Vidheyan* (1993). Among many praises of his splendid performance in offbeat films, the one by *The Guardian* (Manchester) critic, Derek Malcolm is worth noting. He said, Mammootty's performance had the 'soothing quality of subdued acting' and he was surprised that an actor in popular cinema could be so excellent in offbeat films too.

Mohanlal

Nine years younger to Mammootty, Mohanlal's brush with offbeat genre came in FTII, Pune graduate, K N Sasidharan's debut *Akkare* (1983) and thereafter in a number of films, notably in Sibi Malayil's *Kireedam* (1989) and *Bharatham* (1991), T Hariharan's *Panchagni* (1986) and G Aravindan's last film, *Vastuhara* (1990). By far his best acting in offbeat cinema came in Shaji N Karun's *Vanaprastham* (1999) which got a plethora of awards in home and abroad, including the 'best actor' national award for him for his superb rendering of the role of a Kathakali dancer who in private life is just the reverse of the roles he performs, masked, on the stage- unable to sever an unhappy marriage.

Performance in Foreign Films

Himansu Rai, Devika Rani and Sita Devi (Reneé Smith) were the first Indian artistes to perform for exclusively foreign viewers in Rai's co-produced films- *Prem Sanyas* ('Light of the Orient', 1925), *Shiraz* (1928) and *Prapancha Pash* ('A Throw of Dice', 1929)- all in the Silent Era. *Prem Sanyas*, the tale of Buddha told by a sage to English tourists, ran for 10 months in London. Bombay Talkies' first film, starring Rai and then his wife, Devika Rani also had a rave run in Europe.

However, Indian artistes had to wait long to sign and perform in foreign films. Roshan Seth, who did well on the British stage, was the first to act in a number of English films. His most acclaimed roles came in Attenborough's *Gandhi* (1982) in the role of

Jawaharlal Nehru and 'Such a Long Journey' (1988); his performance in the second won him Genie award from the Canadian academy. Sabu, Kabir Bedi, Victor Banerjee, Shashi Kapoor, Danny Denzongpa ('Seven Years in Tibet', 1997) and Ellora Patnaik (Mira Nair's 'My Own Country', 1998) also acted in foreign films. A number of Indian artistes were invited to perform in Merchant-Ivory Productions- notably 'Householder', 1963 (Shashi Kapoor and Leela Naidu), *Shakespearewalla*, 1965 (Shashi Kapoor and Madhur Jaffrey), *The Guru*, 1969 (Aparna Sen), *Bombay Talkie*, 1970 (Aparna Sen), 'Adventures of a Brown Man in Search of Civilisation', 1972 (on scholar, Nirad C. Choudhury), 'Hullabaloo over Georgie & Bonnie's Pictures', 1978 (Aparna Sen) and 'The Courtesans of Bombay', 1982.

XXI. Behind the Camera

“Millions that a producer invests in a film pass through an aperture”.
—*Subrata Mitra*

The technology involved in the making of films in India has not kept pace with that in advanced countries. In Mumbai and Chennai, the latest cameras and other equipment have come but other filmmaking centres do not have ample Arriflex cameras and lenses. In Kolkata, for example, where Satyajit Ray made all his internationally acclaimed films, there was no Arriflex movie camera, owned by any studio till 1995. His early cinematographer, Subrata Mitra bought an Arriflex to shoot Ray's and his second film, *Aparajito*. Mitra was the sole possessor of the German camera in Kolkata for a long time; they used to be hired from him and Deojibhai till the mid-1990s. The Central and the State governments did little to spur technological advances in cinema; the Centre allowed imports of certain cine equipment and materials from 1981 under the Open General Licence (OGL). Innovative cine technologists did not always receive government support.

Cine technicians are not very well paid. Till 1990s, the best technical person in Mumbai and Chennai used to be paid about 35 thousand rupees for working in a commercial, when its 'hero' or 'heroine', if a superstar, was paid up to, or more than, one crore rupees. In Hollywood, artistes pay cameraman separately for their close-ups but not in India. Special effects which have become mind-boggling in Hollywood since Spielberg's *Jurassic Park*, are under-developed in India.

In spite of these limitations and tardy technological progress, India has produced superb films and ace technicians. Satyajit Ray once said, "There is something about creating beauty in the circumstances of shoddiness and privation that is truly exciting". The offbeat wave would not have arisen, if a new generation of cinematographers also did not team up with the directors, not caring for commerce for themselves and for the films, they jointly created. Like famous combinations of director and cinematographer in the West- Eisenstein & Tisse, Orson Welles & Greg Tollen- Indian teams of Guru Dutt & Murthy, Bimal Roy & Dilip Bose, Raj Kapoor & Radhu Karmakar, Satyajit Ray & Subrata Mitra, Mrinal Sen & K K Mahajan, Shyam Benegal & Govind Nihalani, G. Aravindan & Shaji N Karun- have become legends.

The importance of cinematography in any kind of film cannot be over-stated. Hand-held cameras came with the popularity of the offbeat genre and development of light, noise-free cameras, led by *Arriflex*, made in Germany which gradually replaced almost all other cameras and now reigns everywhere. In Kolkata, Ray's internationally acclaimed cameraman upto *Charulata* (1964), Subrata Mitra was the first to use it for the entire shooting of *Aparajito* (1956). He told this writer:

“I was the first to use *Arriflex* for indoor shooting in Kolkata; Mumbai and Chennai studios began using it, much later. I used it for indoor and outdoor shooting of *Aparajito* (1956). Initially, it used to be slighted as ‘Poor Man’s Mitchell’. Gradually, *Mitchell* became outdated and the studios went for *Arriflexes*, because owing to hike in customs duty on spares, it was more economical to buy an *Arriflex* than repairing an old *Mitchell* which gradually gave away to *Arriflex*, as it was less heavy and noisy. In Mumbai, *Arriflex* replaced *Mitchell* when zoom lens began to be used for taking close-ups of dancers; *Mitchell* had none. Gradually, its later models, like *Arriflex-3* and *BL-3* came to be used, which are run with the ‘blimp’ (sound-proof camera-cover) on, which no other camera has.”

Subrata Mitra

Subrata Mitra (born 1930) shot Ray’s 10 features, which contain his career-best work in cinematography. These are *Pather Panchali*, *Aparajito*, *Apur Sansar*, *Paras Pathar*, *Jalsaghar*, *Devi*, *Kanchenjunga*, *Mahanagar*, *Charulata* and *Nayak*. Before the shooting of the documentary on Tagore in 1960, Mitra developed an eye problem and had to be replaced by Soumendyu Roy. He returned to shoot Ray’s first colour film, *Kanchenjunga* (1962) and then his three more films- *Mahanagar*, *Charulata* and *Nayak*. After *Charulata*, he left Ray for two years and returned to photograph *Nayak*.

Mitra went over to Mumbai to shoot Basu Bhattacharya’s *Teesri Kasam* in 1965. The same year, he returned to Kolkata to shoot one more, and his last, film for Ray, *Nayak* but after it, in 1966, he went back to settle in and work in Mumbai permanently. There he wielded camera, chronologically, for Ivory-Merchant’s *The Guru* (1968) and *Bombay Talkie* (1970). In 1980, he cranked the camera for Victor Banerjee’s *An August Requiem* and four years later for a biographical film on independent India’s first Prime Minister, *Nehru* (1984), an Indo-Soviet production, co-directed by Shyam Benegal. Another major work is contained in Ramesh Sharma’s *New Delhi Times* (1985) and in his 1978 documentary on the Rumtek monastery near Gangtok. He also photographed a Cantonese film, *The Arch* in 1967. He made many innovations in lighting and inspired an entire generation of cinematographers. As he told this author in 2000:

“I introduced bounce lighting in *Aparajito*, which was initially jeered at but gradually accepted in Kolkata. In *Charulata*, for large-source lighting, I put 32 100-watt bulbs in big wooden boxes for shooting interiors. In Merchant- Ivory’s *The Guru*, I used quartz-iodine lamps, the antetype of today’s halogen, which had to be imported, post haste, from the 20th Century Fox in New York.”

After shooting *Nehru* in 1985, Mitra did no other, till his death on 8th December 2001. Besides ill health, complicated by a fall, he cited his intolerance of the poor projection standards.

“I have realized that I have no control over my work, once the film goes for public

screening. The luminence on Indian screen is so below the international standard that the chiaroscuro in my work does not come out in projection.”

He was a perfectionist on set and would not shoot until lighting and everything else were to his satisfaction. Sometimes, this led to differences with Ray who interfered in his work, most annoyingly, in *Charulata*. Ray understood cinematography very well and used to set Mitra aside to look through and crank the camera, when foreigners were present on the set, as if to impress them. In a statement, published in *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, shortly before Ray's death, Mitra said that he parted company with Ray because of 'too much interference'.

His work in *Charulata* stunned even the Western world. Renowned American cinematographer, Nestor Almendros was so impressed by his innovative lighting that he introduced it in his school. He told Govind Nihalani in 1981: “All my work after that has evolved around the original inspiration that I got after seeing the photography of *Charulata*.”

Soumendu Roy

Soumendu Roy was Mitra's apprentice and photographed 19 of Ray's feature films (including eight short) and four documentaries, all by himself and two more full-length features with Purnendu Bose. He remained Satyajit Ray's main cinematographer when Subrata Mitra finally left after shooting *Nayak* (1966) till his last film with Ray, *Ghare Baire* (1984), when Ray fell critically ill. He also photographed the hourlong documentary, *Rabindranath Tagore* (1961), as Mitra could not do it because of an eye problem. He also assisted Mitra in Ray's first five films up to *Apur Sansar* (1959) and afterward independently shot *Teen Kanya* (1961), *Abhijaan* (1962) and *Kapurush-o-Mahapurush* (1965). After Mitra finally left in 1966, Roy shot Ray's 10 full-length, two more with the help of Purnendu Bose, three documentaries and two short features. He cranked the camera for other major directors also- Tarun Majumdar (*Ganadevata*, 1978), Tapan Sinha, Buddhadev Dasgupta, Utpalendu Chakravorty, Aparna Sen and Victor Banerjee and shot four Tamil films, apart from some tele-serials for Kolkata Doordarshan. He has given up shooting feature films, because the kind of films, being made in Tollygunge these days, does not give him any creative satisfaction.

K K Mahajan

Another excellent cinematographer who shot almost all of Mrinal Sen's films is K K Mahajan, a contemporary of Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani in the FTII, Pune. He shot all the three seminal films in 1969- Sen's *Bhuban Shome*, Mani Kaul's *Uski Roti* and Basu Bhattacharya's *Sara Akash*. His views on offbeat cinematography are worth noting. Commercial cinematographers, he once said, demand ideal equipment and situation. Offbeat cameramen do not give up in a difficult situation; they will use a bed sheet as an improvised reflector and not insist on arc lamps, if there are not any. The advantage of working in small-budget, offbeat films is that a cameraman can experiment and

innovate. Offbeat cameramen do not like strong and sharp lighting in commercial films, because they cannot give a depth of field. He says, the aesthetic quality of offbeat cinematography also depends on the knowledge of the director. He thinks, Subrata Mitra's understanding of light is 'unsurpassed'.

Shaji N Karun

Shaji N Karun passed out from the FTII, Pune with a diploma in cinematography in 1974 and wielded camera for ten films of G Aravindan (except his first and last) and many of K G George's and M T Vasudevan Nair's. He says, "There is a symbiotic relationship between the director and the cameraman"; the cinematographer is 'the director's eye'. While shooting major Malayalam offbeat films, he learnt filmmaking, its form and sense, which helped him direct his debut *Piravi* ('Birth') in 1988. He entrusted photography of this and his two subsequent films- *Swaham* (1994) and *Vanaprastham* (1999) to other cameramen (Sunny Joseph), because after G Aravindan's death in 1991, he felt a kind of 'mental block' and lack of motivation. "I feel, there is no parallel for him."

Other Cameramen

Among other offbeat cameramen, notable are **Govind Nihalani**, **Virendra Saini**, **Ramachandra Babu**, **Barun Mukherjee** and **Madhu Ambat** in Mumbai, **Balu Mahendra** in Chennai (all three passed cinematography course in FTII, Pune) and **Purnendu Bose** and **Barun Raha** in Kolkata. Nihalani studied cinematography in S J Polytechnic, Bangalore and was an assistant to Guru Dutt's cameraman, V K Murthy in Mumbai before shooting his debut, Satyadev Dubey's *Shantata! Court Chalu Aahe!* in 1971. He shot over 200 advertising and documentary films, half of which he also directed for Krishna Movies but his fame as an ace cinematographer rests on his work for Shyam Benegal and his own films on celluloid and video for Doordarshan, notably *Tamas* (1986) and several adaptations from foreign plays and stories. **Virendra Saini** was inspired by Subrata Mitra's work, while taking cinematography course in the FTII, Pune. He shot all of Sayeed Mirza's, Sai Paranjpye's and some of Mani Kaul's films. He finds it impossible to shoot a commercial film, because the cameraman is given little time to plan his lighting. Barun Mukherjee's work in Rabindra Dharmaraj's *Chakra* (1980) came for high praise.

As assistant to Subrata Mitra and Soumendu Roy for a long time, **Purnendu Bose** watched Ray on set, closely. He assisted Soumendu Roy in two Ray films- *Aranyer Din Ratri* (1969) & *Pratidwandi* (1970) and continues to be Roy's assistant, mainly in TV serials. He shot a number of documentaries, notably Chidananda Dasgupta's on Anand Coomaraswamy, *Dance of Shiva* (1968). He taught cinematography in Satyajit Ray TV & Film Institute, Kolkata for a while. **Barun Raha** photographed Satyajit Ray's last three films- *Ganashatru* (1988), *Shakha Prasakha* (1990) and *Agantuk* (1991) and the documentary on his father, *Sukumar Roy* (1987).

The spurt of advertisement films on television from the mid-1970s created a new generation of cameramen, who were good at shooting glitz and glamour. Outstanding among them who also shot some offbeat films, were **Rajiv Menon**, **Vikash Sivaraman**, **Kiran Dev Hans**, **Rajan Kothari**, **Mahesh Are**, **Chang**, **R.M.Rao** and **Sunny Joseph**. The soft and top lighting that Gordon Willies used in Coppola's *The Godfather* influenced the work of these youngsters and lent to their work a visual 'feel'. Another European cameraman, Sven Nykvist who photographed Ingmar Bergman's films, also inspired some of them.

Among the cameramen who emerged in the 1990s, the work of **P C Sriram** in Mani Rathnam's *Nayakan* and of **Santosh Sivan** in the same director's *Roja* and later of *Asoka, the Great* (2001) deserve mention. Passing out from the FTII Pune, Sivan wielded camera for some three dozen feature films, notably Mani Rathnam's *Roja* and Kalpana Lajmi's *Rudali* and over 40 documentaries in Hindi, Tamil and Malayalam. Other young cinematographers who have excelled in 'stylized realism' since the early 1980s are **Ashok Mehta** (for most of Aparna Sen's films), **U B Rao**, **Baba Azmi**, **Jayan**, **Kumar**, self-taught **Radhakrishnan** and **Francis Xavier**. In the offbeat genre, the current stalwarts in cinematography are **A K Bir** (also a promising director), **Venu**, **Kumar**, **Jehangir Chowdhury**, **Piyush Shah** and **Anup Jotwani**. Bir got four national awards for wielding camera for a Telugu documentary, *Maa Ooru*, Avatar Kaul's *27 Down*, B. Narsinga Rao's *Daasi* and his own *Adi Mimansa*.

Art Directors

Art direction is a film's architecture and was virtually unknown before Satyajit Ray took resort to it in building replica of a village house near Kolkata for his debut, *Pather Panchali* (1955). The director was a West Pakistani young man, Bansi Chandragupta, settled in Jammu, whom he came to know during his visits to the USIS library in Kolkata. Bansi accompanied him and Subrata Mitra in scouting locations for *Pather Panchali* in weekends.

Bansi Chandragupta

Jean Renoir took his help for his *La Fleuve* (*The River*, 1950) which he shot on and near the *Ganga* in south Bengal. When *Pather Panchali* came to be made, Ray entrusted him with building its outdoor sets in a village, Baral, now a suburb of Kolkata. Art direction was then virtually unknown in India and his work in *Pather Panchali* became seminal and a kind of benchmark. Ray assigned him art direction in 19 more of his full-length and one short feature up to *Pratidwandi* (1970). He came to Kolkata in early youth and was a member of Calcutta Film Society where he saw splendid art direction in many foreign films. In 1970, he went over to Mumbai to earn more and left exemplary work in a number of Hindi films, notably Muzaffar Ali's *Umrao Jaan* (1981) before his death, that year. He, however, returned to Kolkata in 1977 to do the art direction for *Shatranj ke Khiladi*. In Mumbai, directors of both genres used to vie to

have him build sets for their films. Kumar Shahani in an obituary said. “He would spray salt in the air...if a set were to represent a location by the sea”.

Other Art Directors

Among other art directors, the outstanding are **Nitish Roy** for Mrinal Sen’s *Khandhar* and *Kharij*, Govind Nihalani’s *Party* and Shyam Benegal’s *Mandi*, **Meera Lakhia** for Ketan Mehta’s *Bhavni Bhavai* and **Sampat Mahapatra** for his brother, Nirad’s *Maya Miriga*. Roy thinks, Chandragupta brought sophistication to art direction in Indian cinema and was the first to demonstrate that “it was considerably more difficult to design the sets of a contemporary situation than it is, for instance, of a historical”. From *Seemabaddha* (1971), Satyajit Ray entrusted art direction of his 12 last films (except *Shatranj ke Khiladi*) to younger **Ashok Bose** who had assisted Chandragupta in *Shatranj ke Khiladi*.

Script Writers

Most of offbeat filmmakers write their own scripts, as distinct from mainstream directors who get them written by others. Stalwarts like Ray, Sen and Benegal have total grasp of the various aspects that go into making a film- the script, camera, costumes, indoor sets, scores, songs and dances, editing and even publicity because all these reflect their *auteur*, or authorship, status.

In the offbeat genre, the script writer who deserves a special mention is **Vijay Tendulkar**. Born in 1925, he became a vanguard in realist Marathi theatre, having founded the *Rangayan* group. His first film script was based on his own play in Marathi, *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe!* (1971), which Satyadev Dubey directed. Then followed his scripts for many of Benegal’s, Nihalani’s and Dr. Jabbar Patel’s films, e.g. *Nishant* (1975), *Manthan* (1976), *Aakrosh* (1980), *Ardh Satya* (1983), *Saamna* (1975), *Sinhasan* (1979), *Umbartha/Subah* (1981) etc. He also co-scripted Saeed Mirza’s debut *Arvind Desai ki Ajeeb Dastaan* (1978). Besides many awards for his plays, a major recognition came in September 2001 when he received the Katha Chudamani Lifetime award for exceptional contribution to literature.

Few offbeat directors have knowledge and expertise of all aspects of filmmaking; mainstream directors have even less. One such director in a Chennai studio confessed to this writer that he did not know the brand and speed of the film in the camera. An exception in the offbeat genre was Ray who did everything- from writing the script to designing posters and writing subtitles of each of his film. In later films, he did much of the camera work too. In fact, he was the complete filmmaker, like many Western masters whom he admired and emulated.

Satyajit Ray

So accurate was his estimate of the length of the finished film, even before it was made that he hardly took more than three ‘takes’. He assisted Dulal Datta, editor of all

his films, on the movieola, during which tension made him shred handkerchiefs with teeth. He designed the posters and the jackets of long-playing records of songs and soundtracks of his films. As his son, Sandip recalled in 2001,

“Father did precise paperwork [before shooting] but within its format he could improvise. He extracted good performance from artistes but would take their suggestion, if there were a novelty. He did not consider anything as very white or very black; there were shades in between. ...He had an analytical approach to human characters. His films have less of dialogue but more of visuals and sounds.”

Nicknamed ‘Boswell to Satyajit Ray’, **Nemai Ghosh** took the largest number of still photographs of Ray, some 90,000- on and off set- including scenes of his films during shooting. With a Canonet QL-17 camera, left in a taxi and given by a friend in lieu of a loan of 240 rupees, when he was 34, he rushed to the sets of Ray’s *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* (1968) to shoot stills. Thus began a career in which he not only became the mainstay of Ray’s stills and portraits (not a single one posed for him) but also shot other offbeat directors and stills of their films. He says,

“Every one of them [Ray’s] was taken of him unawares, when he was directing, relaxing with a cigarette, lost in thought, dreaming up compositions or laughing with his crew on the sets. Usually, he didn’t know that he was being photographed.”

Ghosh published two collections of his photographs of Ray and stills of his films- *Satyajit Ray at 70* (1992), with a Foreword by Robert Bresson, the French director and *Moment of Vision* on 2nd May 2001, to mark Ray’s 80th birthday. When Ray was dying in a nursing home, Ghosh rushed back from Chittagong but did not shoot his last moments. “I did not want to shoot him when he was ill and in pain”. When Ray died on 26 April 1992, “I was shattered”, adds he, “For one year after that I did not want to touch my camera, or even look at it.” He resumed still photography on the persuasions of his sons. He also held an exhibition of his selected corpus, including 20 Ray stills, in Mumbai in October 2000.

XXII. Treatment of Music and Dance

“We are so used to calling cinema a visual art that I sometimes fear, we shall soon forget that sound has an important world of its own.”

—Ritwik Ghatak

The offbeat cinema has *ipso facto* far less scope for songs and dances than other genres; in fact, the genre came into being as a protest against mindless entertainment that crept in mainstream films after the Second World War. Offbeat directors pay far more attention to the background score and other sounds to emphasise the visuals. As the Russian master, I Pudovkin said, “Sounds and human speech should be used by the directors not as a literal accompaniment but to amplify and enrich the visual image on the screen”.

Music directors of most mainstream films focus more on songs and dances than on the background score, or compose the latter so unimaginatively that it does not achieve any cinematic purpose. In rank commercials, music is often a high-decibel drone, in multi-track stereophonic surround sound, harmful to the ear and the nerves. The studio orchestra which composes the background music has expanded from a two to three-member team in the early 1930s to a massive 100-piece or more in blockbusters, made these days in Mumbai and Chennai. Offbeat films neither need nor can afford these extravaganzas. The lyrics have also declined- from compositions of saints and poets like Sant Tukaram in Maharashtra, Sant Thygaraja in the South and Rabindranath Tagore in Bengal, to prosaic dialogues like *Aa Ja, Meri Gadi Mein Baith Ja* (“Come, sit in my car”), sexual innuendoes in *Choli Ke Pichhey Kya Hai* (“What’s there behind your blouse?”), or inane vulgarity in *Bholi Bhali Ladki, Khol Terey Dilki, Pyarwali Khidki* (“O naive girl, open your heart’s love window”). The singing has also changed from the ‘full-throated’ and crooning styles of early direct and playback singers, like Pankaj Mallik and K L Saigal to raucous, foot-tapping and prurient, like *Jhumma Chumma Dedey* (“Jhumma, give me a kiss”).

Songs and dances in offbeat films are a class apart and often serve a cinematic purpose. Either they are required in the context of the story, not merely to regale; or do they emphasise, sometimes like the Greek Chorus, a moral or mood in the sequence they feature in. As film historian, Feroze Rangoonwala once said, many films are spoilt by music, both background and songs; even offbeat films are no exception, e.g. *Astha* (1997) by Basu Bhattacharya and *Mr. & Mrs. Iyer* (2002) by Aparna Sen.

The most outstanding among music composers of offbeat and so-called ‘middle cinema’ films have been Salil Choudhury (notably in IPTA films), Ravi Shankar (especially

in early Ray films), Dr. Bhupen Hazarika (in his own and other Assamese films), Vijay Raghava Rao, Bhaskar Chandravarkar, Vanraj Mehta and among directors, Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak.

Salil Choudhury

Salil Choudhury composed music for all kinds of films but his scores in Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zameen* in 1953 were very original. He did scores for some of IPTA films too and composed political songs for the peasant and other working class movements from 1945 to 1947. Being well-versed in Western classical and folk music, he could fuse Mozart with *Raag Malkosh* with felicity. He used the opening bars of Mozart's 40th symphony for *Chhaya* (1961). His first composition for a non-Bengali film was in Ramu Kariat's *Chemmeen* (1965); he composed for Tamil and Telugu films too with equal felicity. He also composed the national anthem for Bangladesh in 1971- *Amar Sonar Bangla Ami Tomay Bhalobasi*- on orchestra. He was a lifelong admirer of Lata Mangeshkar who said in her obituary tribute on 5th September 1995: "He was a genius, an ardent fan of Mozart and Beethoven whose music inspired him to compose some of his best songs."

Ravi Shankar

Ravi Shankar composed the background music for K A Abbas's *Dharti ke Lal* (1946), Satyajit Ray's Apu trilogy, Tapan Sinha's *Kabuliwala* (1956), Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Anuradha* (1960) and Trilok Jetly's *Godaan* (1963), Gulzar's *Meera* (1979) and Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* (1982). From the beginning of the Sound Era, *sitar* was being used in the background of a pleasant scene or sequence but Ravi Shankar gave it an aesthetic edge, even when playing it solo, as in Ray's trilogy. He limited orchestration to *sitar*, *bansuri* (Indian bamboo flute), *shehnai*, *sarangi* and some other strings. He composed the pensive score of Ray's *Pather Panchali* in just four hours. A sequence, made memorable by his music behind it, is the one toward the end when Apu's mother breaks down at the mention of his sister, Durga by the father who returns home after a long absence, with a *saree* for her. There is no dialogue or sound of crying by the mother but a long wail of the *tar shehnai*, played by Dakshina Ranjan Thakur at his instance. Another is the sequence in *Aparajito* of child Apu, returning with his mother to Bengal from Varanasi, in which a pensive wail by the Indian flute signals the change of landscape, as seen from the train. He excelled equally in composing incidental music in a film, which he considers 'the mettle of a composer'.

Dr. Bhupen Hazarika

Dr. Bhupen Hazarika composed the scores and sang the songs of his own and others' films. Few composers are good singers; Dr. Hazarika is an exception. He is often called India's Paul Robeson whom he was influenced by and came to know as a neighbour in the USA, while doing a Ph.D. in Mass Communication from Columbia University. He composed lyrics and background music for many Bengali, Hindi and

Bhojpuri films, collected a huge lot of folk songs and instruments from the northeast, wrote a number of books on music and composed children's nursery rhymes. His early compositions, like *Ami Ek Jajabar* (Bengali) and *Dola*, sung by him with innovative rhythms, melody and pauses, took Assam and West Bengal by storm. His compositions for his own Assamese films- *Era Batar Sur* (1956), *Shakuntala* (1961, awarded by President), *Pratidhwani* (1964), *Lati Ghati* (1966), *Chik Mik Bijuli* (1969), *Mon Prajapati* (1979) and a Bengali film on elephants, *Mahut Bandhu Re* were charged with humanist emotions. Dr. Hazarika built up a lyrics bank, written originally in Assamese and later translated into Bengali, in which he was equally at ease. Among his compositions for others' Assamese films, notable are those for *Chameli Memsahab* (1975), which got him the President's Award. He experimented with fusing folk with film music to make it 'more identifiable to a wider audience'. In his famous *Dola* song, for example, the first line is Bengali; the next has a Bihari touch and so on and even an American jazz. Much later later, he wrote the lyrics and composed the score for Kalpana Lajmi's *Rudali* (1992).

Satyajit Ray

As to other aspects of filmmaking, Satyajit Ray lent originality to composing music and choreographing dances too. He had a vast experience of listening to Western classical music from boyhood and a 'phenomenal' memory; he could memorise a symphony by 'hearing it thrice' and could tell the composer by listening to a work 'only for a second'. His fondness for jazz was as much as for 18th century European classical music and he made selective use for both in many of his later films. He gave the lead in composing a different kind of score in offbeat films. He did not compose the scores of his first six films, leaving it to noted composers like Ravi Shankar (*Apu Trilogy* and *Paras Pathar*), Vilayet Hussain Khan (*Jalsaghar*) and Ali Akbar Khan (*Devi*).

He began composing from *Teen Kanya* (1961) and did the music of all his films thereafter, including the short films and documentaries, except *Rabindranath Tagore* (1961) whose background score was composed by Jyotirindra Moitra. He became dissatisfied with noted Hindustani classical maestros, as he had to wait long to get their dates. They were also not available for filler music, needed subsequently. Subrata Mitra, also a sitarist, composed a comical one in the sweetment seller sequence in *Pather Panchali*. Film music needs to be sparse and fuse with the image, which *Ustads* were not always capable of. These made him decide to compose the score and songs himself, as he was having 'ideas'.

Musically, his most ambitious film is *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* (1968); the entire score and the enchanting songs (also of *Hirak Rajar Deshe*) were composed by him with a variety of instruments, both north and south Indian, memorably in the sequence of the 6½ minute dance of ghosts. His most imaginative scores were in two Tagore films- *Charulata* (1964) and *Ghare Baire* (1985). He also wrote and set to tune a song in *Devi* (1960)- *Ebar Tore Chinechhi Maa* ("Mother, I have recognised you, now.") in the style of Ramprasad Sen, a 19th century devotee of Kali, and a 'modern' song in *Chiriakhana*

(1967)- *Bhalobasar Tumi Ki Jano* ("What do you know of love?"). Gradually, he built up an orchestra by Alokenath Dey, a flutist who grasped his technique. In the beginning, his orchestra composed the scores in the music studio of HMV but the score of *Ghare Baire* was composed in his Bishop Lefroy Road flat.

His views on film music are worth quoting at length, because they not only explain his own credo but also sum up what film music should ideally be.

"Cinema is a medium which is closer to Western music than to Indian music, because in Indian tradition, the concept of inflexible time does not exist. Our music is improvised; one piece of music can last an hour, two hours, one-fourth of an hour. ..The concept of a piece of music lasting 25 minutes, for example, does not exist in India. There are no 'compositions'- the duration is flexible and depends on the mood of the musician. However, cinema is a composition bound by time. ...Musical forms like the symphony or the sonata have much influenced the structure of my films. For *Charulata*, I thought endlessly of Mozart. In the *Apu Trilogy*, the theme of the train was used and developed for its visual and sonorous elements, like the theme of a symphony. *Kanchanjungha* is a kind of rondo, in which one begins by introducing the elements A B C D E that return a certain number of times."

Mozart was a great influence on his compositions and structure of his films. In *Shakha Prasakha*, he used many of his compositions in the score. The ailing industrialist's son, who lost his memories in a car accident in London, plays bits and pieces from his and others' symphonies. Compositions of Ray merge so tellingly with the visuals that one is not aware of them, separately. In few other directors' films, silence is so eloquent; in crucial moments and turns in the plot, musical notes begin, almost inaudibly and rise slowly, as in a symphony. The title music of *Ghare Baire*, on which he took great pains, is one of his finest; so is that of *Charulata*- soft and ineffable; based on a Tagore tune, signifying a calm and happy heart. Utpalendu Chakravorti's, *The Music of Satyajit Ray* (1990) brought out the wide range and finess   of his compositions for his own films and for Ivory Merchant's *Shakespearewallah*, three documentaries by Bansi Chandragupta, one by Harisadhan Dasgupta and two foreign films- *House That Never Dies* by Tony Mayer and *Max Muller* by John Thicle. Late in his career, he became sceptical about the need of background music in cinema; he used to say, it was needed only for 'unintelligent' viewers. The mood of a sequence, or a scene, builds up from its accompanying music and most viewers would not weep unless the *Sarangi*, or the *Sehnai*, whined. He even planned to do a film without music.

Ray was also very innovative about use of other sounds in his films. He cited two sequences in foreign films to illustrate this- the alarm clock in Marcel Carne's *Le Jour Se Leve* (1939) and the fall of an empty bottle, thrown downhill in John Ford's *Fort Apache* (1948). The motif and sound of trains in *Apu* trilogy, the thud in a mossy pond when child Apu throws a beaded garland, stolen by her deceased sister, Durga and the rising sound of a wall clock in the penultimate sequence of *Ghare Baire* are some of his innovative uses of other sounds.

Ritwik Ghatak

Like Ray, Ritwik Ghatak's cinematic music is often very appropriate. He relied more on Indian string and wind instruments, although he also had a deep passion and knowledge of Western classical music. He also used Tagore's songs in inaffable moments, sung often by an unconventional singer, Debabrata Biswas. In use of other sounds in the track too, he evinced originality. For example, in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, he used whip lashes to emote the inner torments of the refugee girl who completely effaces herself to keep her family and fiancé going. In *Ajaantrik*, various sounds of a ramshackle car emote the mind of its driver. One of the titles of his films, *Komal Gandhar* is the name of an Indian *raga*. He got background scores of some of his films composed by classical maestros and noted composers, like Ali Akbar Khan (*Ajaantrik*), Salil Choudhury (*Bari Theke Paliye*), Jyotirindra Moitra (*Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Komal Gandhar*), Bahadur Khan (*Subarnarekha*, *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* along with Ahidul Haq of Bangladesh and the documentary, *Chhou Dance of Purulia*). He himself composed the scores of his last feature, *Jukti, Takko aar Gappo* and of his short feature, *Fear* and documentary, *Scientists of Tomorrow*. Like Ray, Ghatak also had a passion for Western classical music. Beethoven was such a favourite that he used his Fifth Symphony in many background scores, memorably in *Jukti, Takko aar Gappo*. About sad episodes in *Subarnarekha*, he said, "these were, as it were, variations on a minor scale of the main; sort of an echo which is the soul of any symphonic structure".

Vanraj Bhatia

Born in 1926, Bhatia studied Western music in Royal Academy of Music, London in 1950 and saw many operas in European cities. Giving up professional composing in Europe, he returned to Mumbai and composed scores for a host of documentaries and advertising films. He assisted Jyotirindra Moitra in composing for Merchant-Ivory's *The Householder* (1963) and made his solo debut in Benegal's *Ankur* (1973). He composed for over 30 features, including six for TV (notably for *Tamas*, 1987); films enriched by his cinematic scores are Benegal's *Nishant*, *Manthan*, *Bhumika*, *Kondura/Anugraham*, *Junoon*, *Kalyug*, *Mandi*, *Trikaal*, *Susman*, *Suraj ka Satwan Ghoda* and *Antarnaad*, Aparna Sen's *36 Chowringhee Lane*, Kundan Shah's *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron*, S A Mirza's *Mohan Joshi Hazir Ho!*, Kumar Shahani's *Tarang*, *Kasba* and *Char Adhyaya*, Vijaya Mehta's *Pestonjee* and Pervej Mehrwanji's *Percy*. His forte lies in fusing Indian *ragas* with compositions on Western instruments.

There have been many other able composers in India's offbeat cinema; outstanding among them are Vijay Raghava Rao and Bhaskar Chandravarkar in Pune. Many offbeat directors made films on musicians, singers and dancers. K Vishwanath's *Shankarabharanam* (1979) is about an exponent of Carnatic classical music who teaches and propagates it in the teeth of vulgar modern music influenced by the Western pop etc. Satyajit Ray made a documentary, *Bala* (1976) on the Bharatnatyam exponent, Bala Saraswati and Buddhadev Dasgupta on a Bengali percussionist, *Dholer Raja*

Khirode Natta (1973). An upcoming percussionist (on *tabla*) Bikram Ghosh, son of noted *tabla* player, Shankar Ghosh is to play a musician in Subrata Sen's film, due for release in 2004. Musicals, a genre popularised by Hollywood, can also be offbeat; Ray's *Jalsaghar* (1958) is the best example.

It is little known that Tagore directed picturisation of his dance-drama and musical, *Natir Puja* ('The Worship by Danseuse') on a Buddhist tale for the New Theatres in 1932; his other operas are a favourite on television. It was deemed to have perished in a fire in the studio in 1940 until some reels were found by *Viswa Bharati* and salvaged by a conservation expert, Mahendra Kumar. (Tagore announced to direct a film on his play, *Tapati* but for unknown reason gave it up. Later while visiting Russia, he expressed desire to make a film on evolution of human civilization; nothing more was heard about it.)

XXIII. Government Intervention

The small-budget, high-quality cinema is the most splendid piece of art and should be kept alive in the interest of the society.

—*P V Narasimha Rao**

Neither the provincial nor central government had any role when motion picture arrived in the Indian shore in 1896. The first government intervention, so to say, began with licensing of exhibition theatres (to prevent fires) and collection of amusement tax. In due course, the intervention came also in the form of censorship, setting up of institutes, holding of international festivals of films and giving of national awards.

Censorship

Censorship started in 1918 to suppress propagation of *Swadeshi* ideas and visuals and to delete scenes of amours, particularly involving white women. Censorship of offbeat films, not separately, started after the genre came into being in the mid-1950s. The 1951 report of second film enquiry committee, headed by S K Patil, led to the first major revamp of the film scene after Independence. Offbeat films did not get into much trouble with the censors before the Emergency. During the 18-months it was in force, many unpleasant events took place in the film world too. The film industry became fearful and dependent on the Central Government whose decisions reflected bias and arbitrariness of the censors. Certificates were refused to 23 Indian and 24 foreign films in 1976, the highest in a year after Independence. The Censor Board's decisions in respect of adult matter are often criticised by filmmakers but these became rather political and arbitrary during the period. The offbeat feature films that got into serious trouble with the censors were S S Gulzar's *Aandhi* (1975), M S Sathyu's *Garm Hawa* (1973) and Pattabhirama Reddy's *Chanda Marutha*.

Aandhi ('The Storm') was given a 'U' certificate by the Mumbai Board in January 1975; Indira Gandhi is said to have seen and liked it. Trouble started, when in Chennai (where an AIDMK government was then in power) posters appeared, "See Indira Gandhi in *Aandhi*"; with a streak of white hair, 'trade mark of Smt. Gandhi', Suchitra Sen also looked like her. The producer, J Om Prakash received a notice to show cause, why the film should not be banned under an allegedly inappropriate provision of the 1952 Cinematograph Act. The reason cited was that the film ridiculed the electoral system. The producer urged the Minister not to ban the film, as it would cause him enormous loss;

*Former Prime Minister of India while laying foundation of Satyajit Ray Film & TV Institute in Kolkata on 10 October, 1992

he offered to recast the story by Kamleshwar. The Minister agreeing, 'a revised version was given a certificate with 28 cuts and changes. Dialogues like "because our father is President of the Congress Committee" etc. had to be cut. A scene in which the woman contestant arranged for a kerosene stove to be hurled at her in an election rally to gain voters' sympathy, was changed to show that not she, but her election agent did it.

M S Sathyu's *Garm Hawa* was given a U certificate in 1973 but the Mumbai Board, fearing that it might exacerbate Hindu-Muslim animus, referred it to the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting. It was shown to a group of MPs and even to Smt. Gandhi; after sometime, the Board allowed its release. It ran full house in many cities and got the award for 'the best film on national integration' in 1975.

Pattabhirama Reddy's Kannada film, *Chanda Marutha* ('Wild Wind' 1977) on the theme of revolution, was shot before the Emergency but even before it was presented to the Chennai Board for certification, the Centre banned it. In March 1976, Pattabhi's wife, Snehalata- an actress and a social worker- was arrested under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA) for not divulging the whereabouts of George Fernandes, a family friend and then a trade union leader. She was jailed for nine months, during which her asthmatic trouble aggravated; she died a week after her release. Chennai Board refused a certificate in October that year, on the ground that the film was "likely to promote disorder, violence, a breach of the law, disaffection or resistance to government" etc. Pattabhi protested to the Chairman of the CBFC, several times but on 28th October, 1976 getting another refusal letter from the Board, Pattabhi's daughter, Nandana wrote to the Minister of I & B, alleging bias against the Committee members and asserting that the film cannot promote violence, as it is "an indictment on the futility of violence". On 11th November 1977, the Ministry passed the film.

Chetan Anand's *Saheb Bahadur* (1977) and *Jaaneman* (1976) were withheld for months. The former dealt with corruption in high places; the latter was passed with cuts for 30 inches. Vijay Anand's *Bullet* (1976) was stuck up in the Mumbai Board for about a month. Among documentaries, the films to earn the wrath of the Censor Board during the Emergency were B D Garga's *Roof Above* on the hiatus between the government's promises and the reality, Chidananda Dasgupta's *Zaroorat Ki Poorti* (1979) 'on prices' and S Sukhdev's *After the Silence* (1977) on bonded labour. The new Minister of I & B, V C Shukla warned film journalists that whatever is not allowed in films would not be permitted in film journals also. In September 1975, the Press Information Bureau drew up and circulated a set of guidelines about film journals, based on this self-regulation code. This had a 'salutary effect', as for the remaining period of the Emergency; film journals refrained from even mentioning the films, banned or refused certificates by the Censor Board.

The Ministry also organised a seminar in New Delhi on July 1976 to discuss a national policy for television and film, with Satyajit Ray chairing it, surprisingly. (Ray refused Smt. Gandhi's offer to make a documentary on the Emergency, saying he was 'bad in propaganda'.) Although himself critical of censorship, Ray and other participants

endorsed the government directives on violence, exploitation of women as sex objects and their subjugation. Because of qualified support to the Central Government's aims and policies during the Emergency, its report was withheld. However, the most important observation in the Seminar was a comment by Ray on the effect on cinema of the Emergency. He said:

“The danger is that a total de-politicization of the cinema may reduce films and its audiences to a state of apathy and indifference towards identifying themselves with the political future of the country. This will also encourage escapist entertainment.”

Depiction of sex and nudity was not new in Indian cinema. Before Independence, the censors were more tolerant of kisses and embraces. Such scenes were fewer in offbeat cinema except in exceptions like Ketan Mehta's *Maya Memsahab* (1992), in which Deepa Sahi (his wife) unrobed in adulterous love scenes. Satyajit Ray showed three kisses in *Ghare Baire* (1992), two of them adulterous, which a maturer Censor Board allowed, because they were integral to the story. His short film for the French TV, *Pikoo / Pikoo's Day* (1980), dealt with adultery by a housewife, although, temperamentally, he was against depicting the privacy of sex on screen. In an article, *Film Making* in 1965, he wrote: “Once in a while, I feel like having a fling at a hand-held freeze-frame, jump-cut new wave venture; but one thing stops me short here: I know I cannot have that bedroom scene that goes with it.” In *Charulata* (1964), the intimacy between the lonely wife and her husband's brother is hardly beyond emotional.

Benegal showed rape as repulsive in *Ankur* (1973) and *Nishant* (1975); so did Tapan Sinha in his Bengali *Adalat-O-Ekti Meye* (1981). Deepa Shahi's *Fire* (1997) showed lesbian relation between two sexually frustrated women. *Antarjali Jatra* (1987) by Gautam Ghosh was held up for a while by Kolkata Board, which construed the last sequence as a glorification of *Sati*. Satyajit Ray criticized the decision; ultimately, the Board let it off on clearance by a Revising Committee.

Support for such films came from courts too. In 1965, Justice Hidayatullah, rejecting a prayer for injunction by Maharashtra government on a film by Ranjit D Udeshi had observed:

“None has so far attempted a definition of obscenity, because the meaning can be laid bare without attempting a definition by describing what must be looked for. It may, therefore, be said at once that treating with sex and nudity in art and literature cannot be regarded as evidence of obscenity without something more.”

Opinions are divided on the necessity and continuance of film censorship in India. Satyajit Ray used to call it ‘retrograde’. G D Khosla, who headed the Enquiry Committee on Film Censorship (1968), did not like State involvement. The Report criticised censorship guidelines, saying “If they are followed rigidly, not a single film, Indian or Western, is likely to be certified. The Ministry of I & B set up the Committee on 28th March 1968 to formulate censorship norms but no action was taken on its Report.

Chidananda Dasgupta, film writer, believes that if a group of persons, committed to the values, enshrined by the Constitution and having mature artistic sense can exercise film censorship, the State apparatus can be abolished. In an article in *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, Kolkata (19th January, 1988) he argued that in a country as diverse as India, censorship is a virtual impossibility.

“India’s English-educated elite follows the morality of the 19th century Christian missionaries; contemporary morality has no basis in Indian tradition. Vatsayana wrote *Kamashastra* in ancient India. Hindus worship naked Kali; *Shivalinga* is phallic. Tribal women do not cover their breasts. Naga ascetics walk naked. Women take bath, bare-bodied, in holy rivers. Men in Meghalaya take mother’s surnames; in the South, a girl’s best marriage is with her maternal uncle. Gujarati rural women keep their backs bare; *Santhal* (tribal) women do not wear blouses. In Jaunsar-Bawar area of U.P, all brothers share the wife of the eldest brother. A widow in Haryana can marry her husband’s brother. How can censors decide, what is moral and immoral?”
(Translation by author)

Late Kobita Sarkar (real name: Rita Ray) who was a noted writer on films and a member of the Advisory Panel of the CBFC in Mumbai and Kolkata from 1964 to 1977 as well as a member of Kolkata Board for some time, wrote several articles and a book on censorship, *You Can’t Please Everyone* (1982). Her views deserve to be excerpted at length.

“Our guidelines are lifted almost entirely from the Hays Code, named after Will Hays, one-time Post Master General of the United States, who took over censorship there. Apart from being concocted for an alien cultural pattern, the Code was considered so antediluvian by the West that it has been scrapped in most places abroad...When so much worse is suggestively conveyed, why the kiss should be so violently a taboo remains a mystery... Worst of all, however, are the swiftly cut, alternating close-ups of hero and heroine whose simulated passion, complete with simulated heavy breathing, is far more insidious than a simple kiss. All this makes our cinema among the most truly erotic in the world.”

Many serious filmmakers are in favour of self-regulation; even the Supreme Court has urged for some form of censorship as a constitutionally valid practice. The opponents of censorship give three reasons. One, it is a kind of political control and expecting the government to regulate ethical and aesthetic standards is akin to handing over thought control to it; Two, it is unworkable, as apart from the impossibility of effectively implementing the guidelines, the Censor Board is unable to ensure that the recommended cuts are actually carried out and are not included later. The third reason is video piracy. With thousands of uncensored video parlours, showing uncensored Indian and foreign films, the entire exercise of censorship has been rendered futile.

Before and after Independence, Censor Boards were often uneasy about political satires and caricatures, although a number of films in the genre were let off. Satyajit Ray used to say that because of the censors, he could not show a corrupt politician with a

Gandhi cap. He came very close to parody a Chief Minister of West Bengal in *Jana Aranya* (1975). Investigative documentary-maker, Anand Patwardhan was critical of censorship of documentaries for screening in the *Spectrum India* in the eighth MIFF in February 2004. His entry, 'War & Peace' on communal riots in Gujarat in February-March 2002 faced trouble. The Censor Board asked him to delete references to Mahatma Gandhi being murdered by a Hindu nationalist and the ban imposed on the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* afterward.

II. Institutes

The government's intervention in the film scene came in a big way with the gradual implementation of many a recommendation of the S K Patil Committee. One of these was the setting up (also at the instance of Prime Minister Nehru) of the Children's Film Society in 1955 which was re-named as the National Centre of Films for Children and Young People (N'CYP) in 1992. Other government institutions to improve filmmaking, training, preservation and exhibitions came to be set up in pursuance of the Report. The FFC, launched in 1960, was merged with the IMPEC to form the NFDC in 1980. A Directorate of Film Festivals was started in Delhi in 1973. Initially called the Film Institute of India, a training outfit was started in the premises of the erstwhile Prabhat Studios in Pune. For preservation of old and current films, the National Film Archives of India came up near it (on Library Road), both in 1961.

Film & Television Institute of India, Pune

The first FTII was set up in Pune, modelled on the Film Institute in Paris, run by the French Government, to train small groups of film artistes, directors and technicians. In three decades, the Pune FTII became 'the only recognized place for the sustained study of cinema' in India with a distinguished alumni including Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Mani Kaul, Kumar Shahani, Saeed Mirza, Girish Kasaravalli, Nirad Mahapatra, Manmohan Mahapatra, Jahnu Barua, Ketan Mehta and a host of lesser known directors and technicians. Many of the younger filmmakers who passed out from the institute have been accepted by the initially reluctant industry and some of them, like David Dhawan, have been huge successes in the mainstream too. As early as 1974, Satyajit Ray was very impressed by the institute and in his Convocation address in its premises on 2nd October said:

"I tried to recall what it was that had left such a wholesome impression on me the first time, and the only time, I had been at Poona, some five or six days ago. I threw my mind back and found the answer. It was the freshness of the scene. For the first time in my life, I had been confronted with the spectacle of young boys and girls, wholly wrapped up in the pursuit of films, talking about them; taking to pieces, reading and thinking and arguing about them, perhaps even dreaming about them. I found an optimism here and an enthusiasm, unsullied by the rude pressures of a ruthless industry."

An acting course, started in the beginning, turned out Navin Nischal, Shatrughan Sinha, Anil Dhawan, Premendra, Shabana Azmi, Jaya Bhaduri and Rehana Sultan who made their mark in both offbeat and mainstream cinema. It was discontinued soon after but a short course on film and TV acting for 20 weeks was started in 1995 along with four other courses in production scenic design, animation and Motion Picture Laboratory Practices each for two years. FTII gives a 'healthy mix of pragmatism and ideology' and seeks to develop film sense and sensibility in the trainees. Although only a few of its alumni have come to the limelight, a large number has penetrated the film industry, Doordarshan and the Films Division. In Kerala, the FTII alumni have even got into the mainstream cinema and brought it closer to the offbeat genre. Some diploma films, made by the trainees, have been outstanding. Among the teachers, Ritwik Ghatak, Jagat Murari, N V K Murthy, Satish Bahadur have inspired a generation who are now in the forefront of many regional cinemas.

FTII, Pune has made signal contribution to the making of good cinema. The offbeat Indian cinema is largely the creation of the Institute's alumni and the technical expertise of filmmaking in camera, sound and editing that have influenced almost every area of filmmaking in the country, have come from this pioneer institute, despite long-drawn students' unhappiness with the syllabus and courses offered, leading to frequent strikes.

Satyajit Ray Film & Television Institute

To commemorate Satyajit Ray after his death on 26th April 1992, the Ministry of I & B set up, in 1995, the second film and television training institute in his name in south Kolkata (near Eastern Metropolitan Bypass), sprawling over nearly 40 acres of land. Its aims are similar to those of the FTII, Pune, offering three-year diploma courses in film direction, motion picture photography, editing and sound recording. The first batch of 32 students passed out in March 2000. Students meet a variety of filmmakers, producers and cinematographers etc. and interact with them. Some distinguished filmmakers from abroad also visited and addressed students, e.g. K. Zanussi, G. Pontecarvo and Ismail Merchant. It has a TV studio, a preview theatre with 72 seats, an auditorium with 350 seats and an open-air theatre with 500 seats, both with screening facilities. Three students in the first batch got national awards for their diploma films.

On the pattern of the Pune FTII, Tamil Nadu government set up the State Film & Television Institute on the CPT campus at Rayapuram in Chennai. It offers diploma in Direction and Screenplay Writing, Cinematography, Sound Recording and Engineering, alternatively in Film Processing and Film Editing. There is a certificate course in acting for boys and girls. It also runs a course on the power of the film medium for entertainment and education. Numerous private film and television training institutes have come up in recent years in metropolises, particularly after the expansion of Doordarshan and Satellite TV. *Chitravani*, run by a Canadian missionary, Gaston Roberge in central Kolkata, is in the field for over two decades and imparts theoretical and practical training, despite limited resources. A diploma course in filmmaking and appreciation has been introduced in Jadavpur University in Kolkata. In Hyderabad, D S Deekshit started 'Andhra Pradesh

Theatre' in 1984 to impart training in stage acting to aspirants, which was later expanded to include acting for radio, television and cinema. It has been renamed as 'Akikeni Institute of Media Acting' after the Telugu superstar, Dr. Akikeni Nageswar Rao, in brief called 'AiM Acting'. In NOIDA, near Delhi, several training workshops and institutes have sprung up, mainly to impart training in advertisement and sponsored films, which have a great demand on Doordarshan and other TV networks. Jadavpur University in south Kolkata has started a post-graduate course in filmmaking and appreciation.

National Film Archives of India (NFAI), Pune

Archival preservation of feature films in India began with the setting up of the National Film Archives (NFAI) on 15th February 1964. For nine years before it, producers of award-winning films were required to give a copy each to the government, which were preserved by the Films Division and the CBFC and later transferred to the premises of the FTII, Pune to form what came to be known as the National Film Library. The Director of the British Film Institute, Mr. James Quinn made a gift of two silent 'actuality' films, shot in India in 1898 and 1901, to Prime Minister Nehru, with which the NFAI was to make an auspicious beginning. The Chinese aggression on NEFA in September 1962 delayed its start until February 1964. It was conceived as an independent unit of the Ministry "to acquire and preserve, for the use of posterity, the heritage of national cinema and a representative collection of world cinema". It was a part of the FTII until December 1967, an additional charge for its Principal. Two early Principals- Jagat Murari and Prof. Satish Bahadur- nursed it initially but considerable progress was achieved by P K Nair who as a Reference Assistant in the FTII, worked hard to develop and modernise it, became NFAI's Curator and retired from it as its Director from 1981.

The primary task of the NFAI which is a member of the International Federation of Film Archives is acquisition and preservation of Indian films, which win State Awards and figure in International Film Festivals, or are otherwise landmark films of historical and national importance as well as selected films from other countries. It requests producers or distributors to donate prints and / or master copies (negatives or fine-grain prints), or purchases films if producers do not donate and takes over prints of films receiving State Awards and certified by the CBFC, buys prints of foreign films by exchange of Indian films.

Preservation of Film Negatives

Even with so much acclaim at home and abroad, negatives of a number of Satyajit Ray's and over a dozen films of Mrinal Sen wore off under poor laboratory conditions in Kolkata. *Pather Panchali*'s prints and negative were over-used by its producer, the West Bengal Government for screenings abroad, which fetched a fortune. After Ray's death, Merchant-Ivory Productions bought, on a 12-year lease, distribution rights of his films in north America. The company also offered to finance the restoration of negatives of six of his films- The Apu trilogy, *Jalsaghar*, *Devi* and *Teen Kanya*. Their negatives

were sent to Henderson's Film Laboratory in London but a fire there damaged them. Restoration of *Pather Panchali*'s negative became urgent when the Academy of Motion Pictures, Arts & Sciences (AMPAS) sought to create a montage of Ray's films for presentation before its award of Special Oscar to him shortly before his death in a Kolkata nursing home. AMPAS restored the negative with the help of the National Film Archives, UNESCO, the British Film Institute, London, the U S Congress Library and the Flaherty Foundation in the USA. The restored negatives are now in the care of the Academy Foundation of Film Archives in Los Angeles. A Ray Society, formed in Kolkata in 1994 to preserve his films, has been entrusted with restoring negatives of all his films in vaults with ideal temperature and humidity control in the Science City on E M Bypass.

According to a UNESCO survey, more than three-fourths of Indian feature films, made before the 1950s, have been completely spoilt. Colour negatives do not last beyond 25 years; black & white films have a longer life. In India, things are made worse by using the original negative, every time, for making prints; in Western countries, prints are made from dupe negatives, never from original. Even in air-conditioned laboratories, preservation is not foolproof, because of frequent power-offs and lack of generators.

National Film Development Corporation

The National Film Development Corporation, or in brief NFDC, was 'incorporated' under the Companies Act on 11 May 1975 but actually came into being on 11 April, 1980 by a merger of the Film Finance Corporation (FFC) with the Indian Motion Pictures Export Corporation (IMPEC). In 17 years under the Ministry of I & B, the NFDC produced or financed over 90 films, beginning with *Godaan* (Hindi) by Trilok Jetly in 1963 and ending with Ray's *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* in 1977. Notable among those, in between, were *Stree* and *Amar Jyoti* by V Shantaram, *Ghoom Bhangar Gan* by Utpal Dutt, *Sat Pake Bandha* (Bengali) by Ajoy Kar (in which Suchitra Sen received the best actress award in Moscow), *Charulata*, *Nayak* and *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* by Satyajit Ray, *Bhuban Shome*, *Ek Adhuri Kahani* and *Padatik* by Mrinal Sen, *Kanku* by Kantilal Rathod, *Sara Akash* by Basu Bhattacharya, *Uski Roti* and *Duvidha* by Mani Kaul, *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe* by Satyadev Dube, *Bilet Pherat* by Chidananda Dasgupta, *Maya Darpan* by Kumar Shahani, *Garm Hawa* by MS Sathyu, *27 Down* by Avtar Kaul, *Jukti Takko Aar Gappo* by Ritwik Ghatak, and *Gaman* by Muzaffar Ali. Of these, 38 films, i.e., more than one-third got State national and/or international awards for different aspects of excellence, many of them more than one, like many of Ray's and Sen's *Bhuban Shome* the watershed offbeat film in 1969.

The first film to be produced / financed by the NFDC under a scheme initiated in 1980-'81 was *Aparupa* (Assamese) by Jahnu Barua in 1982, followed by notably, '22 June, 1887' (Marathi) by Nachiket & Jayoo Patwardhan, *Bara* by M S Sathyu, *Bhavni Bhavai* by Ketan Mehta, *Chakra* by Robindra Dharmaraj, *Phaniyamma* by Prema Karanth, *Maya Miriga* by Nirad Mahapatra, '36 Chowringhee Lane' by Aparna Sen, *Ardha Satya* and *Aakrosh* by Govind Nihalani, *Damul* by Prakash Jha, *Tabarane Katha* by Girish Kasaravalli and *Trishagni* by Nabyendu Chatterjee.

The NFDC also produces films, under its own banner, of which notable were *Adi Shankaracharya* (Sanskrit) by G V Iyer in 1984, *Ghare Baire* by Satyajit Ray, *Party* by Govind Nihalani, *Massey Saheb* by Pradip Krishan, *Debshishu* by Utpalendu Chakravarti, *Mirch Masala* by Ketan Mehta- all in 1985, *Pestonjee* by Vijaya Mehta and *Antarjali Jatra* by Gautam Ghosh, both in 1987, *Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro* by Saeed Mirza, *Sati* by Aparna Sen, *Kamala Ki Maut* By Basu Chatterjee, *Percy* (Gujarati) by Pervez Mehrwanji, *Mane/Ek Ghar* by Girish Kasaravalli- all in 1989, *Ek Doctor Ki Mout* by Tapan Sinha in 1990, *Agantuk*, Ray's last film, in 1991, *Tahader Katha* by Buddhdev Dasgupta, *Ek Hota Vidushak* (Marathi) by Dr. Jabbar Patel and *Rudali* by Kalpana Lajmi -all in 1992. Most of these were awarded at home and/or abroad for best direction, screenplay, cinematography, actress, actor, editor, or just as 'best feature film' of the year. It has co-produced eleven films with the Doordarshan and six with foreign governments or parties- the most outstanding being *Gandhi* by Richard Attenborough in 1982, *Salaam Bombay* by Mira Nair in 1988, *Unni* by G Aravindan in 1989 and *Miss Beauty's Children* (English) by Pamela Rooks in 1992.

The NFDC has its own subtitling laboratory in Thane (near Mumbai), another with a 16-mm Film Centre and a non-linear mixing studio, *Dhwani* in Behala and its office in Camac Street respectively, both in Kolkata as well as a Video Centre at Chennai. With three regional offices in New Delhi, Kolkata and Chennai and an overseas office in London, it is committed to promote low-budget films. Under an agreement with Doordarshan, NFDC co-produces good feature and telefilms for national and regional channels as well as for commercial and non-commercial circuits in India and abroad. Its theatre-financing scheme for building mini-theatres with bank loan for screening of offbeat films did not take off, as State governments did not give land for building them. It imports some 30 to 40 films, a year to expose the home audience to films of other countries, which are telecast over national and regional channels of Doordarshan and shown in cinema-halls, apart from sale through videos. It has a distribution network for its own productions and ties up with cinema-halls in metropolises to exhibit its films.

In 1985-'86, the Corporation started holding Indian Panorama with every International Film Festival of India (IFFI) and now abolished *Filmotavas*. It also holds Retrospectives of great filmmakers of India and abroad, mini film festivals and Film Weeks. It also runs a National Film Circle and markets quality video cassettes of Indian and foreign classics as well as award-winning films. It has set up a trust for the welfare of cine artistes, retired and aged.

Between 1980 and 1984, the NFDC diversified into other activities, like subtitling, transferring from film to video and building up 16mm production infrastructure. From 1985, it began importing raw stock to organise International Film Festivals of India through the Directorate of Film Festivals, which was merged with it, temporarily. In 1991, as government support was withdrawn, the NFDC had to take some major steps for becoming economically independent. It became like any other commercial institution. Its films made the Metro Channel of Doordarshan very popular.

Box-office success of *Pather Panchali* and *Bhuban Shome* induced many States and the Centre to produce, or finance, offbeat films by veterans and promising young people who did not have ample resources. Enthused by the performance of the FFC and its successor, NFDC and over-all commercial success of films produced by them, many States launched their own Film Development Corporations, which also helped offbeat filmmakers. The West Bengal Government launched a Corporation in 1973, whose first production was a Ray film, *Sonar Kella* (1974). Among its notable productions were Ray's *Hirak Rajar Deshe*, Ritwik Ghatak's *Jukti Takko Aar Gappo*, Mrinal Sen's *Parashuram*, Utpal Dutt's *Jhar* and *Ghoom Bhangar Gaan*, Buddhadev Dasgupta's *Grihayuddha*, Shyam Benegal's *Arohan* and Utpalendu Chakraborti's *Chokh*. Not all its productions had high artistic merit; the WBFDC was even charged with sponsoring and helping filmmakers with Marxist leanings and beliefs and wasting public money. The Corporation set up a cine laboratory complex, *Rupayan* in Kolkata's eastern township, Salt Lake City (Bidhan Nagar) with facilities of post-production services of 16mm and 35mm cine films, which even veteran filmmakers avail of. It has also built a very modern art theatre complex, *Nandan* (named so by Satyajit Ray) near Rabindra Sadan in south Kolkata, where new and old offbeat films- both Indian and foreign- are regularly screened and discussed by makers, critics and buffs. Kerala, Tamilnadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh governments have also launched their own Film Development Corporations, which along with the NFDC, are trying to sustain the offbeat genre.

National Film Policy

Although filmmaking developed into an unorganised industry in Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai, as far back as the 1920s, and in eight decades grew to be a massive sector with capital investment of over 1300 crore rupees in white and an inestimable sum in black, it was not officially recognised as an industry till 2001, rendering it eligible for low-interest loan from banks and financial institutions. Commercial filmshows are a potent source of government revenue through entertainment tax; there is also excise and import duty on negative and positive film. The film industry has been complaining for many years that the government does not spend adequately from its earnings from cinema for its development. The entertainment, or amusement tax, has been a perennial source of revenue since the Silent Era. With the passing of years, its rates have gone up steadily and now accounts for half, or even more of the actual admission fee for a film in a cinema-hall. The film industry and the government have been at loggerheads since 1918 and the industry has been urging the Ministry of I & B, for years, to frame and implement a national film policy.

In 1980, the Janata Dal government set up a Working Group, headed by the Kannada writer, Dr. Shivrama Karanth to develop such a policy, which gave its report, next year and submitted a draft policy for consideration of the Ministry. Its main recommendation was transferring cinema from the State List to the Concurrent, to enable both the Centre and the States legislate on it. . This was also recommended by the first film enquiry committee, called the Indian Cinematograph Committee of 1927.

It had observed that the very nature of the film industry made it unsuitable for 'provincialization'. In the Government of India Act, 1935 cinema remained a provincial subject, from where it got into the Constitution in 1950 in the State List. The S K Patil Enquiry Committee of 1951 had also repeated the recommendation, arguing that the Centre should have full responsibility for, and control over, the production of films. It observed in its Report that the film industry has been asphyxiated by numerous laws and regulations by many authorities. Transfer of cinema to the Union List would help the Centre enforce regulatory legislation all over the country, uniformly, leaving the States to enforce rules, as necessitated by the local conditions. While implementing the Patil Committee Report, the Centre brought a bill to this effect in the Rajya Sabha in 1956 but withdrew it.

The Group also cited a plethora of complex laws and rules, concerning the film industry, which needed to be simplified. The States, it further observed, regulated the construction of cinema theatres as 'some kind of undesirable activity' and customs and excise levies on raw stock and equipment made film production 'prohibitively expensive and speculative'. It noted the leadership, given by the Film Finance Corporation, from 1960 to stimulate the growth of the minority or offbeat cinema but observed that the government institutions for film development tended to nurture high art in the cinema, neglecting films for the masses. If filmmaking is recognised as an industry, which it actually is, black money which sustains the majority cinema, would have to be replaced by institutional finance.

Report was without implementing any of its recommendations. Nevertheless, a National Film Policy has remained a persistent demand by the film industry and the media. The issue was revived in 2001 when a committee for expenditure reforms, headed by a former Finance Secretary, K S Geethakrishnan recommended privatisation of virtually all government film bodies for cutting government expenditure. It said, film festivals could be organised by the industry and similarly, financing of good films and their marketing (NFDC), training (FTIIs), archival preservation (NFAI), making of newsreels and documentaries (FD), children's films (N'CYP) etc. could be privatised. The then Minister, Susma Swaraj proposed a National Film Board as an umbrella organisation for these disparate offices instead of getting them out of the government, many of which have a good tradition and served the nation well.

III. International Film Festivals

Among the so-called Third World countries, India was one of the earliest to hold its first international film festival in 1952. Held in Mumbai from 24th January to 1st February and then rotated to Chennai, Delhi and Kolkata till the first week of March, it brought a whiff of fresh breeze in the cloistered industry. The screening of some Italian, French and Japanese neo-realist films familiarised a new kind of cinema. More than the industry, this over a month- long festival in four cities inspired some young persons to make a different kind of film; among them were Satyajit Ray and Bimal Roy.

Indian entries were Raj Kapoor's *Awara*, K V Reddy's *Patala Bhairavi*, V. Shantaram's *Amar Bhoopali* (Marathi) and Bengali *Babla* by Agradoot group. From the USA came noted Hollywood director, Frank Capra who hogged headlines in newspapers, as Washington had sent him to keep a watch on the Chinese delegation. Open-air shows in stadia enabled the general public to see many of them; there was none of the restrictions, imposed later by the International Federation of Film Producers' Association. Films may not have introduced any 'artistic and aesthetic values in life' but the 33 international film festivals (*Filmotsavas* included) that the Ministry of I & B organized from 1952 to 2003 have given Indian film-makers, writers and filmgoers an idea of the contemporary cinema in other filmmaking countries and inspired a handful to emulate them. As the renowned Sri Lankan director, Lester James Peries said once, "Film festivals, no matter how badly they are organised, serve a useful purpose".

The festival became competitive with the third, held in New Delhi in 1965; it was granted an 'A' category by the Paris-based *Federation Internationale des Associations de Producteurs de Films (FLAFP)*, bringing it at par with major world festivals at Cannes, Berlin and Venice etc. India adopted a permanent insignia, a representation of peacock- its national bird- with a motto in Sanskrit, *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* ("The whole world is a family"). Up to January 1975, five international film festivals were held in Vigyan Bhavan in New Delhi- but from November that year, a non-competitive festival was started, called *Filmotsava* in alternate years to meet the demands of three filmmaking cities. The first *Filmotsava* was held in Kolkata, inaugurated by Satyajit Ray, with 56 films from 27 countries. There was an exclusive 16 mm section (which became regular from 1983) and a seminar on 'Cinema of Social Relevance'. An *Indian Panorama* section was added to the IFFIs and *Filmotsavas* from 1979, which became a major attraction, in due course, after the IFFIs returned to non-competitive from 1989, as not many good films were entered for India's 'Golden Peacock' for a variety of reasons. For seven years thereafter, IFFIs remained non-competitive to the chagrin of filmmakers, writers and film buffs. Competition was restored, in a limited way, in the 27th IFFI in New Delhi in 1996, among only films by Asia's women directors. A Mainstream Section was added in 1987, in which blockbusters in Hindi and other major languages are featured. Some Indian Panorama films are shown on Doordarshan but on the whole, the IFFIs have become elite extravaganzas, as perhaps in every other country that holds film festivals.

Initially, the first and the four subsequent international festivals were organised by the Films Division and the Ministry of I & B in association with State departments of information etc. To further streamline their organisation, a Directorate of Film Festival was set up in 1975, which now organises all IFFIs and other official film festivals in New Delhi and six other filmmaking cities- Chennai, Kolkata, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Bangalore and Thiruvananthapuram- with the help of the NFDC. From the sixth festival in 1977, the festival period was fixed at 15 days and the dates from 3rd to 17th January; these were changed before 1986 *Filmotsava* in Kolkata to 10th -24th January. The period was reduced to 10 days in 1989 and the dates were changed to 10th -20th January until 2000. On persistent plea by the Directorate, the *FLAFP* agreed to change the dates to 10th -

20th October from 2001 but the 32nd IFFI for the year on the new dates could not be held because of the refusal of the Karnataka government to hold it in Bangalore because of severe drought in parts of the State. The 33rd IFFI was held from 1st to 10th October 2002 and the 34th from 9th to 19th October 2003 in New Delhi before and after Durga Puja and Nav Ratri etc.

The term *Filmotsava* was dropped in August 1988 and it was decided that all future festivals, organised by the Directorate, would be called International Film Festival of India, in brief IFFI, irrespective of their being held in Delhi, or elsewhere. Previously held eight *Filmotsavas* were added to the 12 IFFIs, held till 1989 to make the total number of festivals till that year 20; the 1990 IFFI thus became the 21st. Reduction of the period from 15 to 10 days (excluding the inaugural) resulted in lesser number of films, shown in the 'Information Section', renamed as 'Cinema of the World'; no other section was affected. The Chairmen of the Jury have generally been eminent filmmakers of India and abroad. Satyajit Ray headed it thrice, of 1965, 1975 and 1977 IFFIs, respectively. Raj Kapoor chaired the jury of 1969 IFFI, Lindsay Anderson of 1983, Ms. Jeanne Moreau (French actress) of 1985 and of 1996, Russian director, Gregory Chukhrai of 1981 and Humberto Solas of Cuba of the 1987 IFFI.

The initial zest of common filmgoers for seeing festival films, for most of them, came from a craving for uncensored scenes of sex and female nudity in foreign films. This led to turmoil before cinema-halls in the venue city, requiring police intervention. In 1996 Delhi festival, the glass-doors of a cinema-hall were broken by a surging crowd, wanting to see Shekhar Kapoor's *Bandit Queen* in which Seema Biswas, playing Phoolan Devi, walked naked in a long shot to fetch a pitcher of water from a well, apart from her dreadful gang rape scenes.

Offbeat directors, technicians, composers, art directors etc. come to know the latest trends in their spheres from these festivals. In fact, from the very first in 1952, they have been stimuli to the offbeat generation mainly; the mainstream genre has not been much affected.

Another highlight during these festivals is the holding of seminars, symposia and open forums in the venues where some brainstorming takes place. Every IFFI focuses on a particular stalwart, genre or trend. During the 1995 IFFI in Mumbai, which focussed on India's women directors, Derek Malcolm of *The Guardian* urged them 'to demand equal rights and equal remuneration' with men, as "all over the world women film industry workers were being paid at almost half the rates for men". The 1996 IFFI in New Delhi, which focussed on Asia's women directors, featured 17 of their latest films in the limited Competition Section, which was revived after almost a decade.

Before every IFFI, controversies erupt about its *raison d'être*. The Directorate of Film Festivals, is often criticised for not holding a proper film market for promotion and sale of films at the venue, as proposed by the NFDC. Critics say, the lack of a market for good foreign films is reason for not many good foreign films coming to vie for the 'Golden Peacock'. A debate also rages in the Indian media about the social utility of international film festivals. Doordarshan does show some of the Indian and foreign films,

entered in the festivals but to common cine-goers living far away from Delhi and five filmmaking cities festivals are just news. Tickets for 'hot movies', as sex films are called in common parlance, are sold in black at much higher prices; even otherwise, cinema entry rates have become prohibitive in big cities for the middle class. Most people hold that film festivals cannot cater to the common people, except by a drastic re-structuring. The content of the films screened is often so difficult or highbrow that common cine-goers do not enjoy, or understand, them. This author believes that simultaneously with the National Film Festival, a National Film Fortnight could be organised with the help of State and Union Territory governments and the industries, all over the country, to let common people see the best of their regional and national classics and contemporary films.

The organization of the Festivals has never been above board. Some critics plead for developing a permanent venue, as of Trade Fair, in a major filmmaking city, as the present system of rotating the IFFIs in half a dozen filmmaking cities does not lend it an identity or character. The decision of the Ministry of I & B to make Panaji in Goa the permanent venue of India's film festivals, in the manner of Cannes has also aroused protests by many film personalities and the media. Chidananda Dasgupta thinks, "India's international film festival which could become the most important focus of Asian or Third World cinema, has failed to acquire a character by desultorily imitating big European events in a high-handed style."

Foreign delegates also make very valid comments. In 1989, the Director of Venice Festival, Gulielmo Bairagi found India's 'schism between commercial cinema and art films' very strange. The Director of Toronto Festival, David Overbey in a current affairs programme on All India Radio, organised by this author, argued for having sponsors for the IFFIs. He said, "Many foreign festivals are run by sponsors; Toronto is run by a beer tycoon and Munich by an automobile company and an airline".

Apart from the IFFIs, other film festivals are also organized in India. Many foreign missions organise short festivals of films of their countries in New Delhi. The Directorate of Film Festivals sometimes collaborates with them and allows them to be held in the two Siri Fort auditoria where projection and other facilities are better than in the private halls in Delhi. (Subrata Mitra, India's best cinematographer, used to say that the screen luminence in India's most city theatres is far below the international standard.) Even some noted Film Societies hold festivals on a smaller scale. Cine Central, Kolkata organizes one every year; its ninth in the city in 1995 marked its 30th anniversary and the 100th year of cinema. The enthusiasm of Bengalees about cinema is so ubiquitous that a weeklong festival was held in a cluster of villages in Birbhum district, near Tagore's Santiniketan, in October 1994. Some State capitals are holding separate festivals in recent years. Calcutta Film Festival, patronised by the State Government, ran into 9th year in 2003. Held in November, it draws a large number of people from the city, suburbs and other towns to the Nandan complex where it is held, funded by many companies and a cultural organisation, called *Anamika Kala Sangam*. Malayalam films are being showcased in Dubai (UAE) for the last two years (2002-2003), to cater to the Keralites in Gulf countries. In the second festival in 2003, organised by *International Malayali*

magazine in collaboration with the NFDC, seven Malayalam films were shown, mostly of the mainstream kind; two of these were produced by the NFDC- *Parinamam* and *Arimpara*.

Festival of Short Films

Documentary films do not attract many viewers in the IFFIs, although there is a category in the Indian Panorama section for 'non-feature films' where the best of these in the previous year are slotted. Obviously, in the craze for feature films, particularly of the prurient kind, there are not many viewers for 'actuality' films. In 1986, the Directorate of Film Festivals assigned it to the Federation of Film Societies of India (FFSI) to organise a documentary section in the *Filmotsava* at Hyderabad. In 1990, a separate international festival of documentary, short and animation films was started by the Films Division, to be held always in Mumbai, called *Spectrum India*. That year's section represented the best such films of the preceding decade, the 1980s but from 1992 (the MIFF is held biennially) the section displayed such films made in the two previous years.

Its Retrospectives are very popular. The 1996 Retrospective featured the works of S N S Shastry and B D Garga of Films Division. Garga made 32 shorts and documentaries in 24 years from 1963 and 1987, mostly for the Films Division, eight of which were screened to acclaim, particularly the one on Satyajit Ray in 1964 under the Films Division Series, *Creative Artistes of India*, which got a certificate in London Festival that year. Garga was given the Dr.V Shantaram Lifetime Achievement Award, instituted in 1996. There is also a section for short films, made on videos, called *Video Vista*. The MIFF has always been competitive and the first prize is called the 'Golden Conch'. The eighth MIFF was held in February 2004.

Tamil Nadu government, headed by actress Jayalalitha, instituted an award from 1995 for the best feature film in Tamil, portraying women in a 'gracious and dignified manner'; this was among measures taken by the Chief Minister 'to curb abuse and crime against women in society'. An award was also instituted in the name of V Shantaram, to be given to an outstanding short filmmaker for lifelong contribution; the first award for 1995 was given to B D Garga in the Mumbai International Festival of documentary, short films etc. in January-February 1996.

Space forbids to even list the hundreds of Indian and foreign films that were entered and those awarded in 34 International Festivals, held in Delhi and six filmmaking cities until 2003 as well as in 50 National Festivals and seven MIFFs. Howsoever distant these festivals may have become from common people, they generate a lot of interest among genuine lovers of cinema in their varied forms, which is their *raison d'être*.

IV. National Awards

When an offbeat film gets a big award, it raises expectations about its maker's subsequent films; he may or may not be able to fulfil them. Hearing the news of a big award to one of his early films, Satyajit Ray remarked, "It won't be possible now to make

a bad film". National film awards were instituted in 1954 in pursuance of the S K Patil Committee Report in 1951; until 2003, altogether 50 national festivals have been held. The awards were only two in the first year- one for the 'best feature film' and the other for the 'best documentary film'. Over the years, the categories have proliferated; apart from the award for the 'best feature film' and 'best director', there are some 20 more awards. In the non-feature films category too, there are 20 awards. Special jury awards go to best short fiction film, best film on family welfare, best cinematography, best audiography, best editor and best music director. Two awards are also given for the best book on cinema and to the best film writer.

The proliferating categories in the feature films have often come under criticism of filmmakers and journalists. Until 1972, evaluation used to be done by the regional committees in Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata; the Central Committee in New Delhi considered their recommendations. In the mid-1980s, regional recommendation was done away with and only a National Jury met in Delhi with adequate regional representation to decide the recipient in every category. The critics carp at having an award for 'best popular film, providing wholesome entertainment', i.e. for the best mainstream film that, they say, conflicts with the government's concern for good cinema. If cinematic excellence is the main criterion, how could awards be given for government policies, like national integration, family welfare, environment conservation etc.? Things came to a head in 1992 when Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Chairman of the Jury, refused to recommend any 'popular' film, arguing that such an award implied, wrongly, that awarded offbeat films were not popular. He said, such awards boost box-office returns, which should not be the goal of a national award; and giving a national award to best popular cinema was like giving *Jnanpith* award to a pulp writer. He told this author on 30th January 2001:

"I still hold the view that the jury appointed to choose films for national awards on the basis of their artistic merit should not be asked to make selections for its absence as well. Films, made with the sole purpose of selling needs a different criterion of assessment."

His views expectedly provoked mainstream filmmakers and among others, N. Chandran of mainstream films of *Ankush* (1985) and *Tezaab* (1988) fame protested to them.

The National Awards for 2000 raised a controversy, when they were being decided by a nominated jury in March 2001. Three members resigned and one walked out in protest against so-called 'saffronisation' i.e., selection of some supporters of the ruling constituent Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as members and giving certain awards not on merit but on political grounds. Gautam Ghosh refused the award for the 'best Bengali film' for his *Dekha* and the elder actor, Soumitra Chatterjee, featuring in it, the 'best actor' award. The controversy raged in the media for days, despite a rebuttal by the then Minister of I & B, Sushma Swaraj.

Unlike Phalke awards, National Film Awards for best features have been virtually monopolised by offbeat films and their makers. Satyajit Ray got it six times for *Pather Panchali* (1955), *Apur Sansar* (1959), *Charulata* (1964), *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*

(1968), *Seemabaddha* (1971) and after 20 years for his last film, *Agantuk* (1991). Mrinal Sen got it for four of his films- *Bhuban Shome* (1969), *Chorus* (1974), *Mrigaya* (1976) and *Aakaler Sandhane* (1980). Buddhadev Dasgupta's four Bengali films were awarded- *Bagh Bahadur* (1989), *Charachar* (1993), *Lal Darja* (1996) and *Manda Meyer Upakhyān* (2002). Four Kannada films by Girish Kasaravalli were also awarded- his debut *Ghataśraddha* (1977), *Tabarane Katha* (1986), *Thai Saheb* (1997) and *Dweepa* (2001). Adoor Gopalakrishnan got it for his debut, *Swayamvaram* (1972) and *Kathapurushan* (1995). Shaji N Karun also got it twice- for his debut, *Piravi* (1988) and *Vaanaprastham* (1999).

Virtually, no good offbeat or 'middle cinema' film missed it. It went to Tapan Sinha's *Kabuliwala* (1956), V Shantaram's *Do Aankhen Barah Haath* (1957), Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Anuradha* (1960), K A Abbas's *Shehar aur Sapna* (1963), Ramu Kariat's *Chemmen* (1965), Basu Bhattacharya's *Teesri Kasam* (1966), T Pattabhirama Reddy's debut, *Samskara* (1970), M T Vasudevan Nair's *Nirmalyam* (1973), B V Karanth's *Chomana Dudi* (1975), Biplab Ray Choudhury's *Shodh* (1979), Gautam Ghosh's *Dakhal* (1981), Utpalendu Chakraborty's *Chokh* (1982), Prakash Jha's *Damul* (1984), G Aravindan's *Chidambaram* (1985), Jahnu Barua's *Halodhiya Choraye Baodhan Khaye* (1987), K S Sethumadhavan's *Marupakkam* (1990), Rituparno Ghosh's debut, *Unishe April* (1994), Shyam Benegal's *Samar* (1998) and Jayaraj's *Shantham* (2000). G V Iyer got it for two of his Sanskrit films- *Adi Shankaracharya* (1983) and *Bhagvad Gita* (1992). No award was given in 1978; strangely even Ray's *Joy Baba Felunath*, Sen's *Parashuram*, Benegal's *Junoon*, Buddhadev Dasgupta's, *Dooratwa* and G Aravindan's *Thampu* did not qualify for the year's award.

Phalke Award

The President has been giving, every year since 1969- the birth centenary year of 'the father of the Indian Cinema', the supreme national honour for 'lifetime achievement in cinema', called Phalke Award, named after D G Phalke. It initially comprised 11 thousand rupees, a plaque and a *shawl*; the cash prize has since been raised to one lakh, or 100 thousand rupees. The first awardee was Devika Rani, actress in 1970 and the latest in 2005 is Adoor Gopalakrishnan. The awardees are mostly from the mainstream; in offbeat genre the only awardee is Satyajit Ray in 1984. It went to B N Reddy, Telugu director in 1975, to V Shantaram in 1985, to Dr. Bhupen Hazarika in 1992 and to Hrishikesh Mukherjee in 1999 but they belong more to the 'middle cinema' than to the offbeat. It has been awarded even to lyricists like Majrooh Sultanpuri (1994) and to Pradeep (1998).

There are a number of State and private awards too, given for films and to film personalities, every year. The most glamorous of these are the *Filmfare* Awards, instituted by the popular film fortnightly of Mumbai. In concept and spectacle, these are an imitation of Oscar awards of Hollywood, given to generally films and film personalities of mainstream cinema. They are the reverse of the national, or other institutional, film awards; excellence is judged mainly by popularity measured in box office success and

therefore, they are of ephemeral value. A director who gets a *Filmfare* award may do a worthless film next year; an awarded actor or actress may go to seed. Consistency is not a value in these awards. The award-giving ceremony is held in Mumbai in December, amid great fanfare and spectacle, costing a huge sum. The people who patronize the mainstream cinema hugely enjoy its live telecast on Doordarshan.

Governments of the States, producing films, also give awards to regional films and film personalities annually; conspicuously of West Bengal, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra for Bengali, Malayalam, Telugu and Marathi films respectively of the previous year, which recognize offbeat films and talents too. The *Nandi* awards by the Andhra Pradesh governments generally honour films and filmmakers in mainstream Telugu. The governments of Assam, Orissa, Gujarat, Punjab, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka also honour their films and personalities through annual awards in cash and kind.

Some film journalists associations and film societies also award offbeat filmmakers. The awards by the Bengal Film Journalists Association (BFJA) are reputed for their consistency and prestige. In 1981, the Andhra Pradesh government instituted an award in memory of Raghupathy Venkayya Naidu to honour Telegu stalwarts in cinema. An award in memory of V Shantaram has been instituted in 1995 to honour the best documentary/short filmmaker in a year.

XXIV. Offbeat Cinema in Cold Print

“We must not make exaggerated demands on critics, and particularly we must not expect that criticism can function as an exact science. Art is not scientific; why should criticism be?”

—Francois Truffaut

From the very first show in Mumbai’s Watson Hotel on 7th July 1896, cinema has been featuring in the Indian press. The first film advertisement appeared in *The Times of India*, Mumbai, the same day, about the six Lumiere shorts to be shown on *Le Cinematographé*. They were characterized as ‘entertainment, lasting less than an hour’ and as ‘the marvel of the century, the wonder of the world, living photographic pictures in life-size reproductions’ etc.

Offbeat cinema did not have any such sensational curtain-raiser, or review in the media. The precursor films (discussed in Chapter II) were not hailed as such but reviewers noted their distinctiveness. The press in Mumbai and Kolkata hailed Bimal Roy’s *Do Bigha Zameen* (1953) and the Friday reviews of *Pather Panchali* in Kolkata press on 2nd September 1955 were very appreciative. In spite of their generally warm reception in the West, Ray’s subsequent films were not always praised by Kolkata press. *Aparajito* (1956) fared badly until Venice gave it the ‘Golden Lion of St. Mark’ for the ‘world’s best film’ of the year. A noted painter, Shuva Prasanna tore *Ganashatru* to shreds in ‘The Illustrated Weekly of India’, calling it a ‘testimony to his failing genius’ and ‘fossilisation’ of his mind, angering Ray so much that he never again wrote in, or gave any interview, to the magazine. In fact, whenever he adapted a well-read novel or a story, he was criticised for taking liberties with the original. Irrked by one such review, he wrote a long rejoinder in a Bengali literary weekly, giving his views on cinematic adaptation. He used to say that Western film writers and critics had more ‘penetration’ than Indian; they always “found out what he did in a film”. He added,

“A hebdomadary reviewer would give a synopsis of the theme or the story and then a few remarks about acting and photography. There would seldom be any word on the score and the *misc-en-scene* that binds one sequence to another. The review would be strewn with generalizations and cliches of literary criticism, as if a feature film was a piece of literature.”

Sometimes, recent reviews are couched in slangs and incomprehensible jargon, as in this extract from a Delhi weekly on return of viewers to cinema-halls to see *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun?* (1994): “The syrupy cinematic confection ran to jam-packed houses for months on end, thereby achieving what had until then looked well-nigh impossible: it

yanked the crowds away from the blabbering boob tube and brought them right back where they belonged.” Or consider this from a weekly review of Benegal’s *Hari Bhari* (2000): “Despite intermittently kowtowing [to] the diktats of the Ministry, it does not have the trappings of jholawala jamboree.”, or this from a review of Rituparno Ghosh’s *Chokher Bali* in NFDC’s quarterly, *Cinema in India*: “*Chokher Bali* is quite different from *Ghare Baire*’s pared down narrative where vaporous musings alternate with purple prose that delves into the hearts and minds of its three characters caught in a triangle.”

A noted American film writer said, the critic should “help people see what is in the work, what is in it that shouldn’t be, what is not in it that could be”. Few Indian film reviewers would pass this test. Most of them write smartly, with allusions and innuendoes but hardly from a cinematic point of view. *The Guardian* critic, Derek Malcolm told this writer in 1995, “Most of those who write in English cannot manage the language”. As Pauline Kael, the celebrated American film critic, once said, “If a critic can’t get excited, what’s the point of being a critic?” Few Indian critics are excited about new finds in offbeat genre; they see merit in many films only after they are awarded or appreciated abroad. Sometimes, highbrow critics unnecessarily shred a film, which prompted Gaston Roberge to remark, “India produces films that are much better than what is written about them”. Ignorant and irresponsible reviews have also harmed many filmmakers. As Satyajit Ray said,

“While it is true that inadequate technical resources, erratic financing, slackness in writing and direction and acting have all contributed to the general poor quality of films that surround us, I have no doubt that equal harm has been done by critics, which in films mean anybody with access to print who keep peddling muddled notions about the art form.”

There are exceptions, like Chidananda Dasgupta, Amita Malik, Iqbal Masood, Aruna Vasudev, Kobita Sarkar, Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen and Satyajit Ray himself, to name only the stalwarts who have been very sensitive film writers.

Satyajit Ray

Possibly the best film writing in India, imbued with a ‘true voice of feeling’, has been that by Ray himself. Some 25 of his essays and reviews for newspapers and periodicals, contained in a 1976 anthology, ‘Our Films, Their Films’ (OFTF) have the ‘penetration’ of Western critics, which he found sadly lacking in most Indian writers. For example, take his remarks on Benegal’s debut, *Ankur* (1973) in an article, ‘Four and a Quarter’, reproduced in OFTF:

“As even the bare outline suggests, ‘Ankur’ is not free from melodrama. Benegal makes the mistake of turning the scales too heavily against the hero towards the end, with nothing in the early part to suggest that he is capable of such monstrosity. As a result, he ends up as a rather trite symbol of urban pollution invading the pure air of the country. The whole denouement has the air of being conceived as a forced rounding-off of a story whose normal course would have led to an impasse.”

Ritwik Ghatak

Ritwik Ghatak was not as prolific as Ray in writing on cinema. His letters to his wife, Surama (some of which she published in her memoir in Bengali, *Ritwik*, 1977), contain his ideas and details of filmmaking. He wrote a number of articles, mostly in Bengali, on his and others' films, an encomium on Satyajit Ray, book reviews (e.g. of Siegfried Kraucer's *Theory of Film*, 1960), a collection of which in English translation was brought out by his son, Ritwan, himself a filmmaker after his death. (Ritwan also compiled an excellent collection of sequences from Ritwik's unfinished four feature and two documentaries, including one on Indira Gandhi). Like his films, his views on cinema in his writings are original, frank and forthright, as in this excerpt from his essay, *Two Aspects of Cinema*:

"Every artist somehow manages to carry his childhood with him, tucked into his pocket, right into adulthood. Once that eludes him, he is left an old fogey. He ceases to be an artist and becomes a theorist. This childhood is an extremely fragile mental state, a state of folding into oneself, like one of those shy, delicate creepers that wilt at the slightest touch. At the gross touch of workaday world it shreds into a hundred fragments, withers and loses its sap. All artists must have this experience."

Mrinal Sen

Mrinal Sen gave more interviews in India and abroad than wrote books or articles. Early in his career, he was a maverick in his views on cinema, very different from those by contemporaries like Ray. Like his films, his writings, both in Bengali and English, betray the influence of European offbeat masters, like Godard (his model for sometime), Truffaut, Bresson and others. The influence of Marxism is apparent in his early writings, which he outgrew as he matured as a filmmaker and out of disillusion and disdain about the three communist Parties in India. He published one book in English, 'Views on Cinema' and three books in Bengali, *I & the Cinema*, *Charlie Chaplin & Cinema- its Past, Present & Future*. His speeches, interviews and writings have a clarity and frankness, as evident in this excerpt from a comment on his 1979 film, *Ek Din Pratidin*:

"I badly wanted to make a film about the ruthlessness of the lives lived by the lower middle classes, to understand their desire to conform and become respectable. I did not want to condemn them but, if I may say so, I wanted to piss in the face of such decency."

Chidananda Dasgupta

Dasgupta edited, for some time, the *Indian Film Review*, *Indian Film Culture* and the American journal in India, *Span* and wrote a weekly column on films for the *Indian Express* for a long time. His two books on Ray are among the best on the master; these are *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray* and *Film India: Satyajit Ray* (edited) both in 1981 (the second for the Directorate of Film Festivals) and one on Hindi mainstream cinema, *The*

Painted Face (1991). An extract from *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray* (1980) shows his incisive mind:

“Ray’s acceptance of the narrative illusion as the basis of his films dictated much of his technique. One important aim was that the illusion should not be interrupted by any sudden change or intrusion that might make the audience conscious that it was seeing a film. This is evident in his use of similes...Ray used to consider himself a conscious artist who knew, better than anyone else, what went into his films. He was somewhat impatient with suggestions that there were things in them he was not aware of, things that arose from the subconscious or unconscious levels, determining the selection process so important in cinema.”

Iqbal Masud

Iqbal Masud took to film journalism while in civil service and wrote extensively in newspapers, running a weekly column in a national daily toward the end before his death on 3rd August 1999 at the age of 76. He was the first to cite that even though the era of mythological films ended with silent films, mythology still underlay mainstream social films, as when gods and goddesses would intervene to save their devotees by miracles. He was also very critical about pretentious offbeat films: “Everyone seemed to be apeing European *avant garde* directors, ignoring the true Indian reality as well as the humanity and warmth of people”. He had a high opinion about Ketan Mehta, whom he described as ‘the most talented representative of the new generation’. He thought, the divide between the offbeat and the mainstream was created by the FTII, Pune.

“Art cinema, good cinema, bad cinema...these confident, dividing- and divisive-terms have their roots in the (Pune) Institute Revolution of 1962. If you didn’t understand the myriad repetitions of *Maya Darpan*, you were an ignoramus. Creators and critics (Naseeruddin Shah mainly blames the latter) from the ‘60’s to the ‘80’s nursed this semantic revolution.”

Amita Malik

Amita Malik has been vastly more prolific than Ray, Dasgupta or any other major film writer and is still active as a writer and a journalist. Born in Guwahati in the 1920s to Bengali parents, she surprised an English Governor’s wife by playing Listz on the piano, when still a child. She was also a tennis champion in Shillong where she studied English literature in a college. After a stint in All India Radio, Delhi she became a film reviewer with ‘The Statesman’. During her many sojourns abroad to cover major festivals, she met Alfred Hitchcock in 1956 and interviewed Satyajit Ray with Marlon Brando. She also befriended many celebrity artistes (e.g. Devika Rani, Dev Anand) and filmmakers (e.g. David Lean) but not sparing them in her writings. Her brutal frankness, exposure of many inside stories of films and filmmaking, scathing criticism of governments and incisive wit made her both loved and feared by film personalities. She has a prodigious memory, even at old age, from

which she wrote her autobiography, 'Amita- No Holds Barred' (1999). Her favourite butt is the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting for the shortcomings in running the annual film festivals in Delhi and five filmmaking cities and neglect of the documentary genre. Like Khushwant Singh's, her writings are very smart and readable, as evident from these two sentences: "Bombay film heroes who caved in to their bullying parents but also looked on as their heroine went out bravely into the storm". Or "[Indira Gandhi] always used to step out of her plane as if out of Band Box."

Aruna Vasudev

Aruna Vasudev's 'The New Indian Cinema' (1986) was the first authentic book of the offbeat genre and introduced many talents and their films to the reading public. In early 1960s, she studied film and television in New York University and the Film School in Paris. She made some short films in India before returning to do her doctorate on Indian film censorship on which she also wrote a path-breaking book, 'Liberty & Licence in the Indian Cinema'. She edited a number of publications for the Directorate of Film Festivals and co-edited 'Indian Cinema Superbazar'. The brightest feather in her cap is the film quarterly, *Cinemaya* that she launched in 1988 and running it to growing popularity to this day, surviving the fate of similar serious film journals. Apart from Indian films, every issue of this well-produced journal focuses on various other Asian cinemas. From its pages, readers all over the world come to know of the richness of Korean, Japanese, Chinese and Mongolian cinema. Being in English, *Cinemaya* has become a link between the Middle East and former Soviet republics, India and Southeast Asia, China and Japan. After the closure of 'Cinema India-International', following the death of its editor, T M Ramachandran, *Cinemaya* has become the Asian parallel of *Sight & Sound*, published quarterly from London by the British Film Institute.

Kobita Sarkar

Like Aruna Vasudev, known more for her books ('You can't please everyone!', 1982 and 'Indian Cinema Today') and articles on cinema and film censorship, Kobita Sarkar (real name Rita Ray) switched over to film journalism from copy writing in an advertising firm. She was correspondent for 'Films & Filming', London and wrote on Indian cinema in many other foreign journals. She wrote commentaries for documentaries and spoke on radio from many A I R stations, and occasionally on Doordarshan. For 13 years, she served the CBFC, as an advisory member of Kolkata regional office and member of the Board in Mumbai. She was on many government committees about cinema and a delegate to many festivals abroad. Never wholly defending or blaming censorship, she delved deep into viewers' psyche and the socio-political milieu to determine the society's right response to cinema.

"Perhaps the really pernicious effect of censorship as it is, is that it resists change, even when it so obviously needs a shot in the arm. In the process, there are a host of totally hypocritical and inaccurate fallacies, which we maintain. Villains and

rapists are punished in films- but is that always so in real life?...Censorship does, in this matter, tend to stretch our gullibility! The real problem with censorship is that it is not yet a scientific persuasion that can be measured in any visibly accurate terms."

Foreign Writers

Indian cinema should be indebted not only to foreign festivals and viewers but to writers also, for the recognition and growth of its offbeat genre. In fact, if *Pather Panchali* did not have the instant acclaim in New York and Cannes and later in other European cities, the genre might not have blossomed at all. The Western world was thus a catalyst to the 'offbeat wave' that eventually rose after *Bhuban Shome* and *Uski Roti* in 1969, particularly the major film festivals, held at Cannes, Berlin, Moscow, Karlovy Vary and Venice. They did not stop awarding Indian offbeat films with and after Ray but were quick in recognising those by his successors too- from Mrinal Sen to Mira Nair. Foreign film writers also played a crucial role, notably, Erik Barnowe, Marie Seton, Andrew Robinson, Gaston Roberge, Yves Thoraval, Derek Malcolm of *The Guardian* (Manchester, U K), Penelope Houston, Tom Milne and a host of other writers on Indian cinema in 'Sight & Sound' and 'Sequence', London besides many other researchers and writers in European and American journals.

Erik Barnouw

Erik Barnouw collaborated with S. Krishnaswamy to write the first authentic post-independence history of the Indian cinema. 'Indian Film' (1963) from the Columbia University Press (Indian edition by Orient Longmans) created a stir among the intelligentsia, comparable to that on publication of Marie Seton's biography of Satyajit Ray in 1971. The first edition covered the Indian film scene up to 1962; a second edition in 1980 updated the scenario. Paul Willeman collaborated with Ashish Rajadhyaksha to produce the monumental 'Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema' (1995) for the British Film Institute and Oxford University Press, to which every writer of India's film history has to be indebted. The third important history has been written by a Frenchman, Yves Thoraval 'The Cinemas of India' (1896-2000) for Macmillan in year 2000. Individually, foreign writers who introduced major talents to the West are:

Penelope Houston

Penelope Houston, the celebrated editor of 'Sight & Sound', London for many years, was among the first foreign journalists to introduce Ray's *Pather Panchali* and subsequent films to the readers of her quarterly and through her 1963 book for Penguin 'The Contemporary Cinema'. Some three pages, devoted to Indian cinema, were almost wholly taken up by her enthusiastic account of Ray's first eight films, up to *Kanchanjungha* (1962). She did take notice of Ray's successors in the genre- Ghatak, Sen, Benegal and a host of younger filmmakers as well as of Indian festivals in the pages of 'Sight &

Sound', written either by her, or by Derek Malcolm, Tom Milne and other columnists and reviewers.

Marie Seton

The first comprehensive introduction of Satyajit Ray to the Western readers was done by a British woman who lived in India, Marie Seton; her 'Portrait of a Director: Satyajit Ray' caused a sensation in India too when it came out in 1971. A friend and admirer of Ray, his first full-fledged biography by her detailed his lineage and the hinterland of his creative mind, unknown to even many Bengalees who first saw his path-breaking films. She gave detailed account of making of each of Ray's first 17 features, up to *Pratidwandi* (1970) and the long documentary on Rabindranath Tagore; unfortunately, she could not bring out a second edition before her death in a London hospital on 16th February 1986. Despite a tone of hero-worship, 'Portrait of a Director' has the usual 'penetration', characteristic of Western writers on Ray.

Andrew Robinson

Ray's second Western biographer, Andrew Robinson carried forward the intense look at his life and works up to *Ganashatru* (1989) in his monumental 'Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye' (1990); three years later Ray died. Although it was criticised for certain inaccuracies in India (Ray pointed out a few), it has remained the standard biography of Ray and an objective analysis of all his features, shorts and documentaries except two, *Shakha Prasakha* (1990) and *Agantuk* (1991). Robinson wrote no other book on Indian cinema but did one on the art of Rabindranath Tagore after carrying out intensive research in Shantiniketan. The text of his book on Ray ends with a fine description of Ray's outlook on the world at 68:

"Like the ageing Tagore, contemplating the rise of intolerance all over the globe in the late 1920's, Ray finds it harder now to hold on to his old faith in human beings. Much that he cherished in both Bengal and elsewhere has irreversibly altered for the worse, including the atmosphere of intellectual enquiry and artistic creativity in which his family flourished. ...In a century of unparalleled human self-destruction and ravaging of our natural environment of which Bengal has had much more than its fair share, Satyajit Ray and his works remind us of the wholeness and sanctity of the individual, and offer us intimations, if we will tune ourselves to him, of a mysterious unity behind the visible world."

Gaston Roberge

Less well-known than major Indian film writers but almost as informed and profound as the best of them is a Canadian missionary, Gaston Roberge who runs an institute, Chitravani in central Kolkata to teach film aesthetics to young people. Occasionally a film reviewer, the genial Father wrote some half a dozen book on various political and sociological aspects of cinema. Indian and foreign. In one of them, 'Another Cinema for

Another Society' (1984), he chalked out a 'militant programme' to bring to birth another cinema to build up a better society.

"To create another cinema is not an easy task; and then there are people who just love cinema as it is and would not wish to have another one. Yet we need a cinema, new and different from the bulk of the films produced....The promotion of another, new and different, cinema can only be part of a larger cultural programme."

Film Journals

Cinema journals that focus on offbeat films are an endangered species in India, as elsewhere. They come out like meteors and like them, burn up fast; from their ashes, sometimes, new ventures sprout. The little magazines on films, theatre and poetry, many of them from Kolkata, somehow carry on, often irregularly and having little to attract the common reader. Of the good ones to close are the 'Bulletin of the Calcutta Film Society', started by Satyajit Ray and Chidananda Dasgupta in the late 1940s, 'Indian Film Culture', an organ of the Federation of Film Societies, edited by Dasgupta in the early 1960s, *Montage*, edited by Uma Krupanidhi for Anandam Film Society, Mumbai [which brought out an excellent Satyajit Ray Number in July 1966], 'Cine Vision India', edited by Ranee Burrah, 'Cinema India-International' and 'Film World', both edited by T M Ramachandran (who also compiled an excellent anthology, '75 Years of Indian Cinema'), 'Splice' by Samik Bandyopadhyaya, 'Deep Focus' by A.L.George Kutty of Bangalore, 'The Film-Maker', edited by K.A.Abbas, 'Cinema in India' from the NFDC, which was the last to close, following withdrawal of subsidy by the government but revived in July, 2001 as a quarterly, edited by Deepa Gehlot. Many editors and publishers incurred heavy losses to run them. Nevertheless, they have rendered a yeoman service to the cause of good cinema and many of India's best writings on films have appeared in them.

Serious journals, still continuing, include *Cinemaya*, edited by Aruna Vasudev, (which calls itself 'the Asian Film Journal' and completed 10 years in 1998), the revived quarterly 'Cinema in India' by the NFDC, *Lensight*, a technical journal 'for the celluloid and electronic media professionals', published by the Director, FTII, Pune, *Chitrabhasha* in Bengali by North Kolkata Film Society, *Kino* by Cine Club of Kolkata, *Chitrapat* by Calcutta Film Society. Many film societies in West Bengal and some southern States bring out their organs, which are not easily available on stands but treat cinema seriously.

The Directorate of Film Festivals brings out, on the occasion of annual film festivals, an anthology of articles on various aspects of contemporary Indian cinema and synopses etc. of feature and non-feature films, selected for screening in the Indian Panorama showcase as well as a compendium on the foreign films shown. It also awards best writings on cinema, every year, few of which abide. Shoma A. Chatterjee, a perceptive and prolific writer on cinema and other arts, received the award in 2002. So does the Films Division during the Mumbai International Film Festival (MIFF) of shorts and documentaries for some years now. Film societies bring out special issues to mark the festivals, held in their regions.

A plethora of mainstream film journals, produced lavishly, focus on gossips, scandals, affairs and defiance of law by personalities before and behind the camera. Being costly, few of them reach common filmgoers who sustain India's huge film industry. In literate minds, they breed opinions and prejudice which bar a true enjoyment and appreciation of films. Ray's masterpiece, *Charulata* (1964) on a Tagore story of amorous attraction between a lonely wife and her husband's brother, made old women weep inconsolably on the shoulders of their grand children. If they had read its reviews, they might not have responded so spontaneously. Books on the genre are far less than those on the mainstream. Many foreign universities and publishers have brought out books and monographs on them. In one such from Berkeley University, USA, Ray found the 'best review' of his *Pather Panchali*.

In the West, major filmmakers have written on their and others' films, e.g. Truffaut, Bunuel, Capra, Kazan, Godard, Kurosawa and Tarkovsky- to name a few- but except Ray, Sen, Ghatak, Buddhadev Dasgupta and Adoor few other directors have written little about their work, or generally about cinema. Adoor Gopalakrishnan wrote a treatise on cinema aesthetics in Malayalam and spoke on his films to interviewers (including this author); Buddhadev Dasgupta has given many interviews in home and abroad. Major film critics write only for newspapers, on Fridays and Sundays; few write generally about cinema- its technology or aesthetics. While in the West, film writing has ushered in significant trends and movements, like the Italian neo-realism (De Sica, Zavattini etc.) and French *Nouvelle Vague* (Truffaut and Godard in *Cahiers du Cinema*), nothing like this happened in India. A spate of cinema writing in English and virtually in every Indian language has not improved cinema, because as Satyajit Ray once said: "The rude fact is, cinema has never been saved by writers".

XXV. Window on the World

“Do not be a frog in the well.”

—A dialogue from Ray’s Agantuk (1991)

No silent film was shown abroad commercially, while the Era lasted till 1934. Dadasaheb Phalke gave trade shows of his first three films in London in 1914 to attract foreign buyers. In 1933, Himanshu Rai’s first film in English, *Karma* was exhibited in Britain and other European countries.

Foreign Awards

Venice was the first foreign festival to feature and award good Indian films from as early as 1934; that year, Devaki Bose’s *Seeta* was shown. V Shantaram’s first sound film, *Amar Jyoti* for Prabhat was shown in Venice in 1935 and 1936. The first Indian film to be awarded abroad was *Sant Tukaram*, also from Prabhat. Directed by Damle and Fattelal, it was adjudged ‘one among three best films’ of 1937. Shantaram’s *Shakuntala* (1943) had a brief commercial run for 12 days in the Art Theatre of New York. Chetan Anand’s *Neecha Nagar* was awarded the Golden Palm at Cannes in 1947.

However, what began with Satyajit Ray’s debut, *Pather Panchali* (1955) and went on for 21 more of his films, upto his last, *Agantuk* (1991) is an unremitting applause in international festivals of many hues and statures. This made him say,

“I think, I have been able to cross the barrier between cultures. My films are made for an Indian audience but I think, they have bridged the gap.

His home and foreign awards make an awesome list, dotting his 36-year career in the Indian cinema. Although all his 26 full-length and eight short features as well as five documentaries have not been widely seen in and outside West Bengal, but for him the world would have remained unaware and unappreciative about good Indian cinema. Many other Indian filmmakers have received awards abroad with and after him but none else won so many, in such major festivals. His films were no flashes in the pan and although not all his films are masterpieces, together they present a more excellent corpus than any other Indian director’s. Shortly before his death on 26th April 1992, he told Sharmila Tagore (the actress whom he launched in *Apur Sansar* in 1959), interviewing him for a video news magazine that he hoped, his films would be seen for at least 50 more years. His world appreciation climaxed on 16th March 1992 in the award of the Special Oscar ‘for lifetime achievement’ six weeks before his death in a Kolkata nursing home and in a long run of *Agantuk* in Paris, shortly after death.

The maximum number of 13 awards, home and foreign together, went to *Pather*

Panchali, followed by six for *Aparajito* (1956), four each for *Apur Sansar* (1959), *Charulata* (1964), *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* (1968), *Teen Kanya* (1961, two for *Samapti*, one for *Post Master* and one for *Two Daughters*) and *Sonar Kella* (1974), three each for *Ashani Sanket* (1973) and *Jana Aranya* (1975) and two each for *Jalsaghar* (1958), *Rabindranath Tagore* (1961), *Mahanagar* (1963) and *Nayak* (1966) and one each for *Abhijaan* (1962), *Chiriakhana* (1967), *Devi* (1960), *Seemabaddha* (1971), *Shatranj ke Khiladi* (1977) and the documentary, 'The Inner Eye' (1974).

The films that went unawarded are, surprisingly, *Ghare Baire* (1983), *Aranyer Din Ratri* (1970), *Hirak Rajar Deshe* (1980), *Kanchenjunga* (1962), *Kapurush-o-Mahapurush* (1965), *Parash Pathar* (1957) and four short films- *Bala*, *Pikoo*, *Sadgati* and *Sikkim*. Of the films that did not win any award abroad, some became favourites of foreign viewers. *Aranyer Din Ratri* ('Days & Nights in the Forest' 1970) and *Shatranj Ke Khilari* ('The Chess Players, 1977) ran for many weeks in London. *Jalsaghar* ('Music Room', 1958) was acclaimed on the French TV, when shown with the short feature, *Sadgati* (1982), made for Doordarshan.

India's offbeat cinema has been awarded abroad for other than aesthetic values too. In 1954, Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Jamin* (1953) won the Prix Internationale at Cannes, the 'Prize of Social Progress' at Karlovy Vary and a special prize in Venice in 1955. Ray's popularity in the West was not only for the aesthetic values of his films. *Pather Panchali* was a 'culture' shock to foreigners for its depiction of stark poverty and misery in a backward Bengali village of the 1930s, which foreign viewers construed as prevailing in the mid-1950s when the film was released, or even later, when they saw it. Europeans could not bear to see Indian villagers eat with their fingers. *Kabuliwala* (Bengali, 1956) by Tapan Sinha got 'Silver Bear' at Berlin for 'Best Background Music'. V Shantaram's *Do Ankhen Barah Haath* (1957) was awarded at Berlin for its 'impressive treatment of a social problem; it got another prize in the same festival for its 'deep and poetic symbolism'. Recognition of Ray's *Nayak* (1966) in Berlin was not only for the film but for its maker's 'high artistic eminence in the world of films' too. Mrinal Sen's *Aakaler Sandhane* (1980) was commended at Berlin for its 'humanitarian approach'; Cannes gave a Special Jury Prize to his *Kharaj* in 1983. Earlier, *Oka Oorie Katha* (Telugu, 1977) received a similar prize at Karlovy Vary in 1978.

Foreign recognition came for artistes, performing in offbeat films also. The Moscow Festival of 1963 gave the 'best actress' to Suchitra Sen for her superb performance in the role of a wife in conflict with her husband in *Saat Paake Bandha* (Bengali) by Ajay Kar. Madhur Jaffrey got the 'best actress award' in Berlin in 1965 for enacting the jilted lady in *Shakespearewallah* (English). Then a newcomer in Bengali cinema, Ranjit Mullick received the 'best actor' award at Karlovy Vary in 1972 for doing the role of a jobless youth in Mrinal Sen's *Interview* (1970). Venice gave Anjan Datta the 'Alitalia Prize' for enacting 'an angry young man' in Sen's *Chalchitra* (Bengali, 1981).

Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, Shyam Benegal, Adoor Gopalakrishnan

and Buddhadev Dasgupta formed a good image of Indian cinema, at least among the cognoscenti abroad. Ray was a rave in the West for 10 years- from 1956 to 1966- but afterward, apart from *Pratidwandi* (1970) which received a minor prize at Venice in 1971, no other film won any major award abroad. *Ghare Baire* (1984) was not noticed at Cannes at all, where it was India's official entry in that year.

The next generation of offbeat filmmakers who have been acclaimed abroad, comprise Adoor Gopalakrishnan and G Aravindan of Malayalam cinema; Buddhadev Dasgupta, Aparna Sen, Gautam Ghosh and Utpalendu Chakravorti of Bengali cinema, Nirad Mahapatra of Oriya cinema, Kumar Shahani and Mani Kaul of Hindi cinema and Dr. B N Saikia and Jahnu Barua of Assamese cinema. Adoor's *Elippathyam* (1983) was awarded the Sutherland Trophy by the British Film Institute in 1984, causing a furore in India. His next, *Mukhamukham* was also praised in minor festivals. Although Aravindan's films did not win any major award in any Western festival, they were praised by the cognoscenti. Utpalendu Chakraborti's *Chokh* was awarded at Berlin in 1982 and Buddhadev Dasgupta's *Neem Annapurna* at Karlovy Vary in 1980. Gautam Ghosh's *Paar* (1986) was acclaimed in many festivals. Several of Dr. B N Saikia and Jahnu Barua's films were shown and acclaimed in minor festivals after winning national awards.

While many of Satyajit Ray's films have been raves abroad, at home he used to be branded as 'un-Indian', 'unpatriotic' and charged with 'peddling India's poverty abroad', as Mumbai comedian I. S. Johor and actress Nargis Dutt observed after the global acclaim of *Pather Panchali*. But the fact is, not even half a dozen of his 39 films (long and short taken together) depict poverty; he is drawn more to depicting opulence, e.g. *Jalsaghar*, *Ghare Baire*, two Goopy-Bagha films and *Shatranj ke Khiladi*. He dealt with a variety of themes in his 34 feature films and hardly ever repeated them.

The films of two of his coevals- Mrinal Sen and Ritwik Ghatak- did not do as well in box office as some of Ray's, e.g. the Apu trilogy, *Charulata* and *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* but the films by them and some youngsters were liked abroad for depicting aspects of India other than recreated by Ray. Sen's best films- *Baishé Shravan* (1960), *Akash Kusum* (1965), *Bhuban Shome* (1969), *Kolkata '71* (1972), *Mrigaya* (1976), *Oka Oorie Katha* (1977), *Ek Din Pratidin* (1979), *Aakaler Sandhane* (1980), *Kharij* (1982) and *Khandahar* (1983)- were praised in foreign festivals for their novel themes and bold cinematic idiom. A retrospective of Ritwik Ghatak's films was held in London, eight years after his death, kindling an interest in him. The Bengali milieu in his films is very different from Ray's but through this Retrospective, the West came to know the sincerity and intensity of feeling with which he made his films amid formidable odds and a wholly original style of filmmaking, uninfluenced by Hollywood.

Interest in little-known social and cultural aspects of India, more often seamy, brought recognition to some young filmmakers in foreign festivals. Utpalendu Chakraborti's *Chokh* was acclaimed in Berlin for probing the typical Indian syndrome of the rich mercilessly exploiting the poor. His *Debshishu* (1986) which depicted, rather exaggeratedly,

the miracle-mania of the Hindus, came for praise in the Locarno Festival of 1986, where it won two awards.

However, Indian cinema is known abroad more for its makers than for its artistes. A film by Ray, Sen and these days, by the 'third generation' filmmakers in home and abroad attract a minority audience, who hardly look for any favourite artist in them. Ray's films are seen for the artistic delight they give, and for reflecting a 'bit of India', seldom to see an artiste who might have impressed them in a previous film.

The Western world was quick to acclaim many of India's offbeat filmmakers when, at home, they were ignored, or met with a tardy recognition. Western recognition of many Indian films (e.g. Ray's *Aparajito*) and other works of art (e.g. Rabindranath Tagore's paintings) often resuscitated them from lukewarm and even adverse criticism at home. Many offbeat films would have remained confined, and perished, in cans, if Western festivals did not praise them, creating thereby some box-office potential. Some offbeat directors make films with an eye to having them screened in foreign festivals, with scant regard for home viewers' edification or enjoyment, which actor Naseeruddin Shah once publicly deplored to justify his defection to mainstream films. This disregard for common viewers has done no good to them, or to their films, as many of them could not be released, or lay in cans for a long time, causing enormous loss to their sponsors or producers.

XXVI. Initiatives for Better Cinema

“Like literature, filmmaking is, and should remain, an open profession so that any one with something to say should be able to say it in his own way.”
—Indira Gandhi

No movement for good cinema was necessary before the 1950s- the watershed decade- when an offbeat genre was added to the hydra-headed mainstream. The genre came to stay and in fact, thrive, from the early 1970s, when a kind of ‘offbeat wave’ formed in major language cinemas. The word ‘mainstream’ was first used extensively by governments to mean the films of the popular kind that formed the bulk of production in all regions. The rubric ‘offbeat’ was first noticed in the writings of Satyajit Ray, very conspicuously in his article, *Indian New Wave* (1971). Before the 1950s, the films were either good or bad- a commercial success, or a failure. The distinction between art and commerce from the decade indicated a kind of ‘dissociation of sensibility’ in the viewers.

It is popularity of *Pather Panchali* in the country and abroad that sent a signal to producers and financiers in Kolkata that offbeat films, if well-made, could also make money. Ray did not have any problem in getting producers for his subsequent films; in fact, he once got a *carté blanche* offer from Hollywood to make a film of his choice, which he did not avail. He made *Pikoo / Pikoo’s Day* (1981) on a blank cheque from the French TV. Producers were not lacking for Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak and most other offbeat contemporaries either but their films could not attract a large audience. The gradual lumpenisation of the film-going public after the Second World War had driven a wedge into the monolithic audience that was there before it. In Kolkata, Ray, Ghatak and Sen went on making their kind of films, a few also hitting the box-office. In the 1990s, they were followed by a second generation which made a number of striking films in Hindi, Bengali, Assamese and Oriya as well as in four south Indian cinemas, calling for the media label, ‘Indian New Wave’.

Some of them pooled money from their savings and insurance policies, friends, admirers and other private sources, or from the NFDC from 1969, to make low-budget films, because banks would not give them any loan, nor would market producers and financiers invest in their kind of films. Adoor Gopalakrishnan set up the ‘Chitralekha Film Co-operative’ in 1965 with some like-minded friends, which produced and distributed some of his and others’ early films. After running for 15 years, it lost steam in 1980 owing to management problems. The complex has since been acquired by the Southern Air Command. The committed Marxist filmmaker of Kerala, John Abraham launched the Odessa Collective, for which he collected small donations from the public to produce,

distribute and exhibit offbeat films till his accidental death in 1987. The cost of making and distributing *Amma Arian* (1986) came from roadside ticketed shows of Chaplin's *The Kid* and Anand Patwardhan's documentary, *Hamara Shaher* (1985) as well as from donations of two to 10 rupees in cash and of 100 rupees through shares from thousands of people. He beat drums himself on streets to collect these with which he distributed *Amma Ariyan* to over 700 screening units, all over Kerala. It was produced by Odessa Movies, which he launched as part of the Odessa Film Movement, involving common people for making good films.

G Aravindan had a wealthy friend and admirer, Ravindranathan Nair of General Pictures, who produced his films, despite losses. Satyajit Ray himself produced only four of his 28 feature films- *Jalsaghar*, *Apur Sansar*, *Devi* and *Teen Kanya* but for most other films he had to seek financiers, like the West Bengal government, NFDC and market producers, some of whom, as he used to say, 'avariciously' exploited his films. Sen also produced a few of his films but in general, offbeat directors had to look for private producers who sometimes made enormous profit also, e.g. Ray's *Charulata* and *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* and Sen's *Bhuban Shome*. As Buddhadev Dasgupta told this author in 1991, an offbeat film made at a modest cost could break even, if it ran for six weeks in a provincial chain. However, few offbeat films could stay that long.

Film Society Movement

A development that spurred the making of offbeat films is the fast growth of film societies from the 1970s. Adoor Gopalakrishnan attributes the relative superiority of Malayalam cinema to the phenomenal spread of film societies in Kerala: "They do exert a certain degree of influence on quality film-making". Curiously, it was George Bernard Shaw who started the world's first film society in the late 1920s, towards the end of the Silent Era. In the two decades between the two Wars (1919-1939), film societies in the West created the taste for offbeat, *avant-garde* films of Germany, France and Italy, which led to commercial birth of specialised cinemas in Europe and the USA.

In India, some members of the 'Amateur Photographers' Society' of Mumbai, led by an Englishman, Stanley Jeffson, then Editor of the 'Illustrated Weekly of India', formed a core group in 1937- an antetype of film society- to make some short features, different from the common kind. Raw stock was then cheap and processing facilities were easily available in laboratories. Five years later, the Bombay Film Society was set up by four documentary makers- Homi Sethna, Stevenson, Vijaykar and K. L. Khandpur, who all wanted to learn new techniques from Western films.

The third was Calcutta Film Society, formed on 15th August 1947 by Satyajit Ray and Chidananda Dasgupta. It was nurtured by them, a common friend, Harisadhan Dasgupta and a host of other filmmakers, critics and buffs to make it, eventually, their intellectual hub. A friend of Satyajit Ray from their university days, Chidananda Dasgupta allowed the turret in his house in south Kolkata for the office of the Society. He was also behind the setting up of the Federation of Film Societies of India in 1960 and for first

seven years, was its Secretary. It bought a print of Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) immediately for screening to members and discussion.

They also edited, and wrote in, a Bengali film quarterly, *Chitrapat*, brought out by an innovative publisher, Dilip Gupta of the Signet Press, Kolkata for which Ray did a number of cover designs and illustrations for books and magazines. The Society arranged special screenings of foreign and Indian classics and held discussions on them. It collected, or took on loan, prints of American, British, French, Italian and Japanese classics from their consulates in Kolkata and screened them in private halls. Many visiting and passing film celebrities addressed the Society in its premise at *Bharat Bhavan* in central Kolkata, notably Jean Renoir (who was in Kolkata in 1948 to shoot his *The River*), Pudovkin and Cherkasov. Some young film buffs started another society, 'Cine Central' in Kolkata in the 1970s which has remained very active and held a centenary celebration of Indian cinema in 1996, screening many Indian classics of both mainstream and offbeat genres.

Shortly after the global rave over *Pather Panchali* from 1955, the Bengali Cultural Association of Mumbai, led by a film buff, Mrityunjoy Sarkar launched 'Anandam Film Society'. On 13 December 1959, representatives of film societies from Delhi, Patna, Roorkee, Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata met in New Delhi and resolved to form themselves into an apex body, called the Federation of Film Societies of India (FFSI), with Satyajit Ray as its first President. The film society movement really took off in Mumbai after K. A. Abbas's 'Film Forum' merged with 18 craft unions of the industry in 1964. The first conference of film societies of Maharashtra was held under the auspices of *Prabhat Chitra Mandal* in 1982 and thereafter came a spurt in formation of film societies. In two years, their number in western Maharashtra rose to 56, out of which 18 were in Mumbai alone. In Mumbai alone, there were 80 societies.

Although the movement seems to be weakening, the number of film societies has increased in the last 10 years. In 1990, for example, five southern States had 66 of them; in 2000, their number rose to 132. Only in three years- 1992, 1998 and 2000- their number fell marginally from those in previous years. They were also formed in colleges, universities and elite clubs in Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai, Thiruvananthapuram, Pune and Hyderabad.

The zest spread to even in district towns where societies were formed under the patronage of District Magistrates and Superintendents of Police. A few of these even hold festivals of offbeat films, apart from showing foreign classics and contemporaries, regularly. Initially, membership spiralled in many new societies, as people wanted to see Western hard-porn films, which were not required to be censored, if they are to be shown in film festivals, or societies.

The societies, affiliated to the Federation, are assisted by it. Many of them are registered and get films for screening to members from the Federation mainly but also from NFAI, Pune and its branch offices at Bangalore, Thiruvananthapuram and Kolkata.

The NFDC, the Films Division and the Children's Film Society also lend them feature films, shorts and documentaries; so do many foreign missions and private distributors.

Decline of the Movement

Expectedly, people forming or joining film societies to see pornographic films, dispersed after the initial zest. Only a handful of societies survived exodus of spurious members, e.g. Calcutta Film Society, Cine Central in Kolkata, Prabhat Chitra Mandal and Anandam Film Society in Mumbai, Surya Film Society in Thiruvananthapuram and Suchitra Film Society in Bangalore. The advent of colour TV and video in 1984, microwave network of Doordarshan, next year and the spread of cable television from the mid-1990s weaned away viewers from cinema-halls and members from film societies, because movie channels showed a lot of good, bad and indifferent films. Not having their own auditoria, the societies were hit hard by rise in rentals of private cinema-halls.

By the end of 1990, out of 56 societies in western Maharashtra in 1984, 30 closed down; in Mumbai out of 18 societies, only eight survived. Membership of the surviving societies fell so low that it appeared nobody was interested in art cinema. Even serious filmmakers walked out of the movement and committed offbeat directors, like Ketan Mehta, Prakash Jha and Govind Nihalani leaned toward the mainstream. Foreign missions in State capitals also cut down supply of their films. After the collapse of the Soviet block, it became difficult to procure Russian films and major sources of foreign films suddenly dried up. Mumbai's *Prabhat Chitra Mandal* is assisted by the NFDC and the V Shantaram Foundation but still viability eludes it. It once had a staggering 3000 members but over the years, its membership came down to around 600. The *Film Forum*, started by K A Abbas closed down, a few years back, having on its rolls, in its heydays, some 3000 members. In Pune, *Aashay Film Club*, which organised a function to commemorate 75 years of Indian cinema in 1988, also closed down.

Government help to the film societies is too meagre to sustain them. The Central Government used to give the FFSI three lakh rupees in a year for distribution to its 253 affiliated members, which is far less than what they need. The funds from membership fees and holding of charity shows are too little for their activities. The film society movement has not been able to regain the momentum that it had in the 1970s. In a message to the Seventh Triennial All-India Conference of Film Societies in Pune on 4th and 5th December 1999, Shyam Benegal suggested that film societies procure films from Asian, instead of from the eastern European countries, from where procurement has become difficult after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He said:

“The film societies would need to work out a new strategy. Asia is emerging as a region that is making excellent films. Countries like Turkey, Iran, China and even countries like Vietnam are making excellent films. The Federation of Film Societies needs to make a special effort to gather films from these and other nations of Asia. The other region to look at is Francophone Africa and Latin America. It is with films from these countries that renewed enthusiasm can be developed in the film society movement of India.”

However, the crisis eased somewhat by 1994 with gradual liberalisation of the economy, which gave impetus to satellite TV. The Star and Zee TVs entered urban Indian homes and cable network spread to even rural towns. The film industries took advantage of the situation and adopted a new distribution system. New films were released across the country, debarring their screening on cable channels for some time. Viewers had to return to cinema-halls to see new blockbusters, which were publicised long before release. With the craze for video and TV waning, film-lovers and buffs returned to film societies too. Celebrations to mark the centenary of cinema's arrival in India in 1996 recharged the film society movement, as many home and foreign classics were shown by societies. However, large-scale video piracy weakened the new distribution system.

Government and Private Initiatives

The Central and the State governments have been concerned about good cinema after Independence. Close on the heels of institution of awards and festivals, many State governments set up Film Development Boards to help local talents and industries. They also built studios and laboratories where films could be shot and processed at subsidized rates, cheaper than in the private sector. National awards, instituted in 1953 and State awards instituted at various times thereafter, give recognition to, and encourage, talents before and behind the camera. Filmmaking States now hold annual award-giving ceremonies with some fanfare, like star parade, seminars etc. Many private bodies have also instituted awards and prizes, notably the 'Filmfare' magazine of Mumbai, which confines them to artistes and talents behind the camera in the mainstream Hindi cinema only.

Training institutes also further the cause of good cinema, although Ray, Sen and Ghatak in the offbeat and Raj Kapoor, Sohrab Modi and Guru Dutt in the mainstream did not go to any. Private acting and cinematography schools have sprung up in major filmmaking cities, generally run by noted artistes and cameramen of the region. Exclusive chambers of commerce have come up for film production, distribution and exhibition, e.g. South Indian Film Chamber of Commerce, set up in 1939.

Visiting film dignitaries have also emphasized the need for film education in India for a wider appreciation of good cinema. Polish director, Kryztof Zanussi while speaking at a Film Appreciation Course at FTII, Pune had said on 31st May 1994, "Just as the written language is taught all over the world, the art and science of films should also be taught universally".

Seminars, Symposia and Workshops

Seminars, symposia and workshops, held in Delhi and six filmmaking cities, periodically, harp on the need for a better cinema but leave little impact on filmmaking. Major seminars and symposia are organised by the Directorate of Film Festivals generally during the annual international film festivals and some by film bodies and societies. Their minutes and resolutions are carefully drafted and sent to the Central and State governments. A very large and significant seminar was organised by Devika Rani in 1955, at the instance

of Jawaharlal Nehru, in which many celebrities of Indian cinema took part. During 1975-'77, another seminar was held in Delhi, chaired by Satyajit Ray. In 1995, a number of well-attended seminars were held in New Delhi to discuss the alarming trend of violence and vulgarity in the mainstream cinema, which caused uproar in Parliament and the media. It focussed particularly on a group of prurient and sexy songs, conspicuously *Choli key Pichhey Kya Hai* ("What is beneath your blouse"), composed and sung by a Rajasthani folk singer, Ila Arun and lippered by the ravishing heroine, Madhuri Dixit in Subhash Ghai's *Khal Nayak* (1994).

Another seminar, covered by the media extensively, was on the linkage between literature and cinema, organised by the Sahitya Akademi from 24th to 26th February, 1995 in New Delhi. Eminent writers, critics and filmmakers dealt with connections between feature films and various forms of literature and their common sources, like myth and folklore for three days. Opening it, stage and cine actor-director, Girish Karnad observed that the fidelity of cinema to literature or other sources was closer in the West than in India. Mrinal Sen spoke of his belief that a filmmaker should not only be true to the literary work that it adapts but also to the medium.

Seminars, symposia, workshops, appreciation courses, books, articles and interviews have not improved India's mainstream cinema; they merely whetted a few minds and gave them forums to vent their views. As media critic, Amita Malik once observed, "In the ultimate analysis, most seminars reduce themselves to amusing and entertaining talking shops where everyone takes himself, or herself seriously and acts as a messiah for the day". The voluminous reports, submitted to the government, "are filed away and forgotten." Some non-government organisations are also working for promotion of good cinema. Bimal Roy's daughter, Rinki Bhattacharya formed a committee in memory of his father, Bimal Roy Memorial Committee in 1996, which she also heads, to hold special screenings of her father's and others' films and award personalities behind the camera.

Another significant development in the 1980s was the introduction of cinema courses in certain universities, which Satyajit Ray often pleaded for. Jadavpur University in south Kolkata started a Department of Film Studies for a graduation course and Calcutta University opened a Film Study Centre in the mid-1990s. A Canadian missionary, Gaston Roberge, teaching in St. Xaviers College, Kolkata started film study courses, and later set up an institute, *Chitravani* in the city. Some film societies hold study programmes and appreciation courses for their members. The National Film Archives have been holding a six-week film appreciation course for a long time.

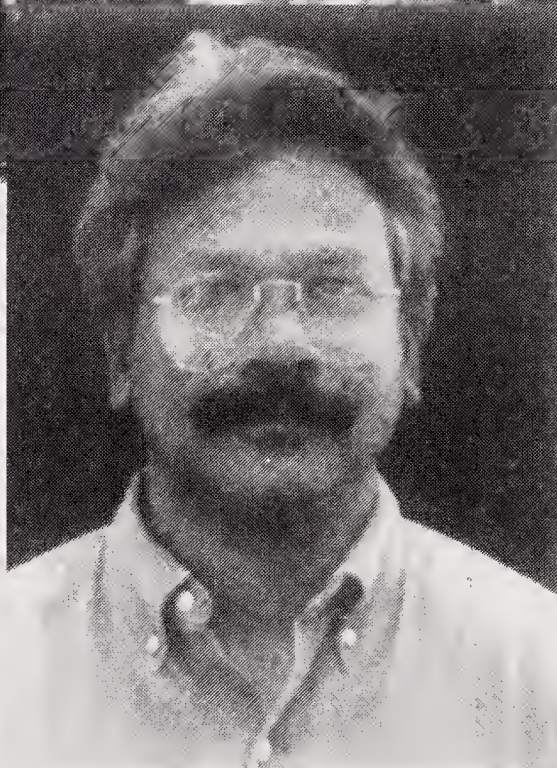
K V Subbanna and *Ninasam*

The apathy of common viewers toward offbeat films is due not only to corruption of tastes by inane and vulgar mainstream films but also to poor understanding of the medium. A Karnata student, K V Subbanna resolved to ameliorate the situation, starting from his village, through a centre, called *Ninasam* which became world famous..In early 1940s, he set up a library in his village, Heggodu in northwest Karnataka, brought out a

cyclostyled weekly and occasionally, presented plays. In 1949, they named their outfit, *Nilakanteshwara Natya Seva Sangha*, in brief, *NINASAM*, after the community's deity, *Nilakanteshwara*. In 1980, they started a theatre institute which began a 10-month diploma course on stage acting to some 20 trainees, every year. A well-equipped auditorium and an itinerant repertory, *Tirugata* were added in 1985, which in the last 18 years, staged over 2000 performances in more than 200 places. *NINASAM* organises workshops, appreciation courses and a theatre-training project for school children. After attending a film appreciation course by Satyajit Ray's biographer, Marie Seton in Pune in 1967, Subbanna started screening his and other Indian and foreign offbeat directors' in the centre.

Since 1977, the Centre's film society, *Ninasam Chitrasamaja* has been holding annual film festivals, apart from screening classics and contemporaries. It has also published 20 books on film and a host of pamphlets on various aspects of cinema. With a handsome grant from the Ford Foundation, the Centre started a project, *Jana Spandana* that helped co-ordinate a large number of film festivals and short appreciation courses for school and college students as well as for members of public organisations, from all over Karnataka. The citation of the 1991 Magsaysay Award for him said:

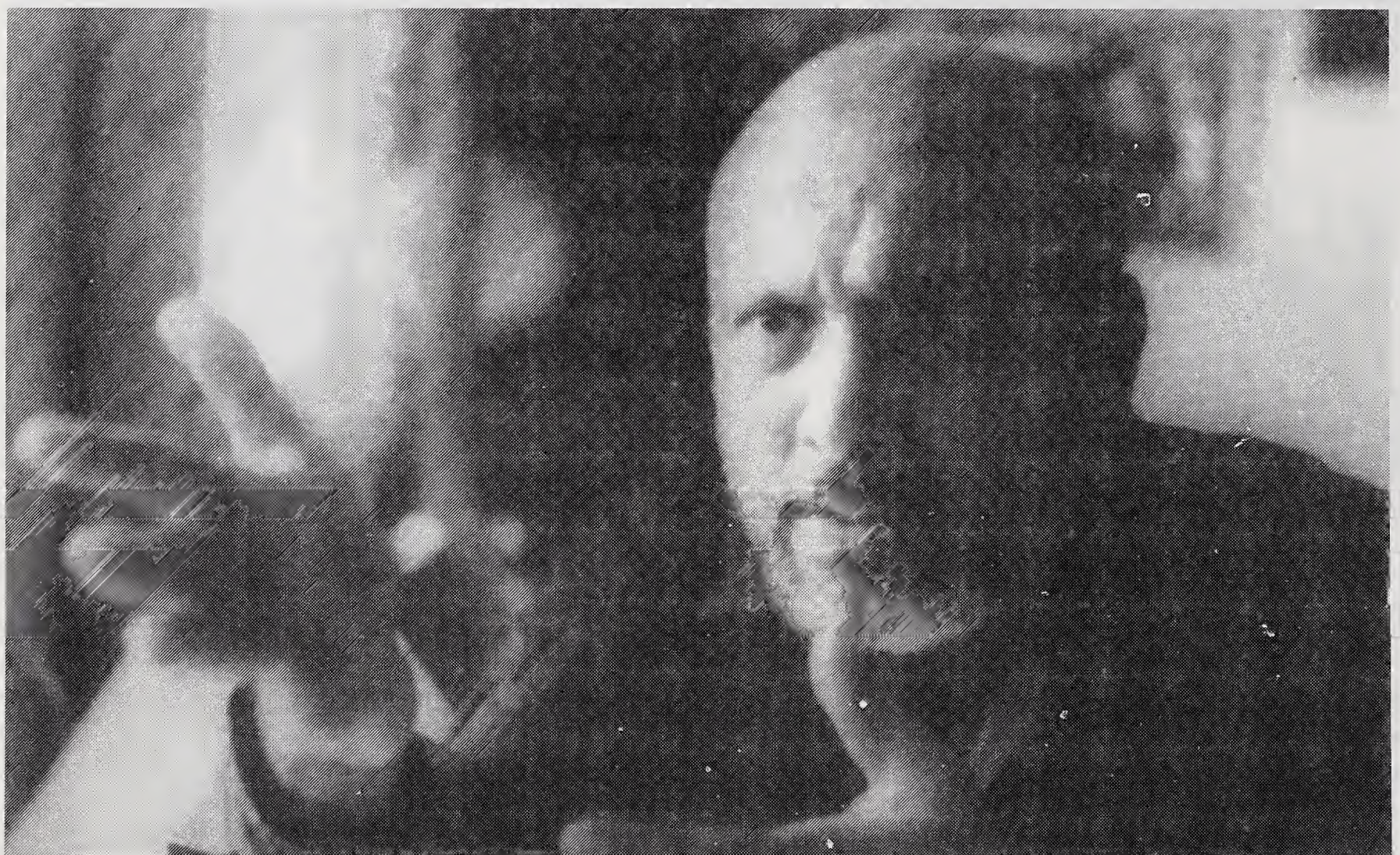
"By introducing modern plays and films to rural folk in south India, Subbanna is making a powerful case for the universality of art...By taking such films on the road, alongside its stage-plays, *Ninasam* is bridging the gulf between urban and rural cultures."



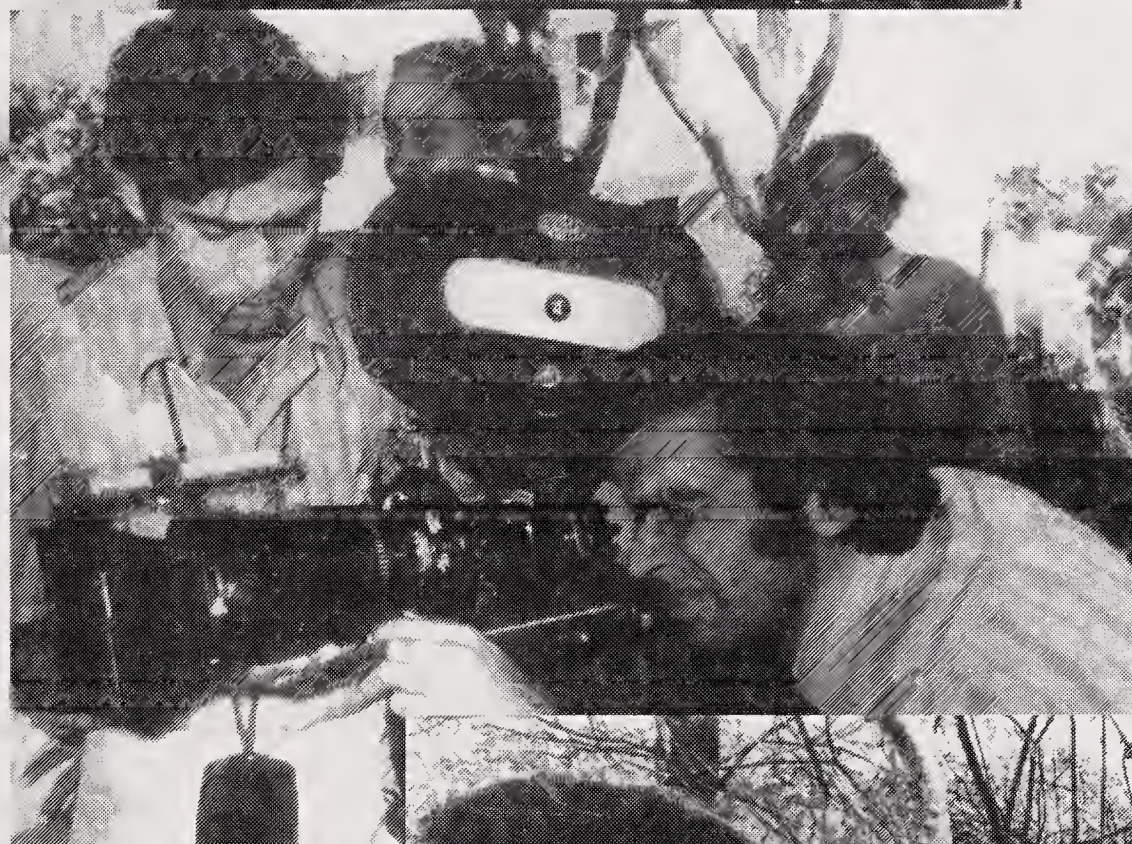
Clockwise from left -
 Girish Karnad: Director with substance
 and one of the finest scriptwriters; Aparna Sen:
 Talented actress turned filmmaker ;
 Fazil: one of the committed offbeat
 film Directors of Malayalam Cinema ;
 Mani Rathnam: versatile Tamil film Director
 now turned towards commercial cinema



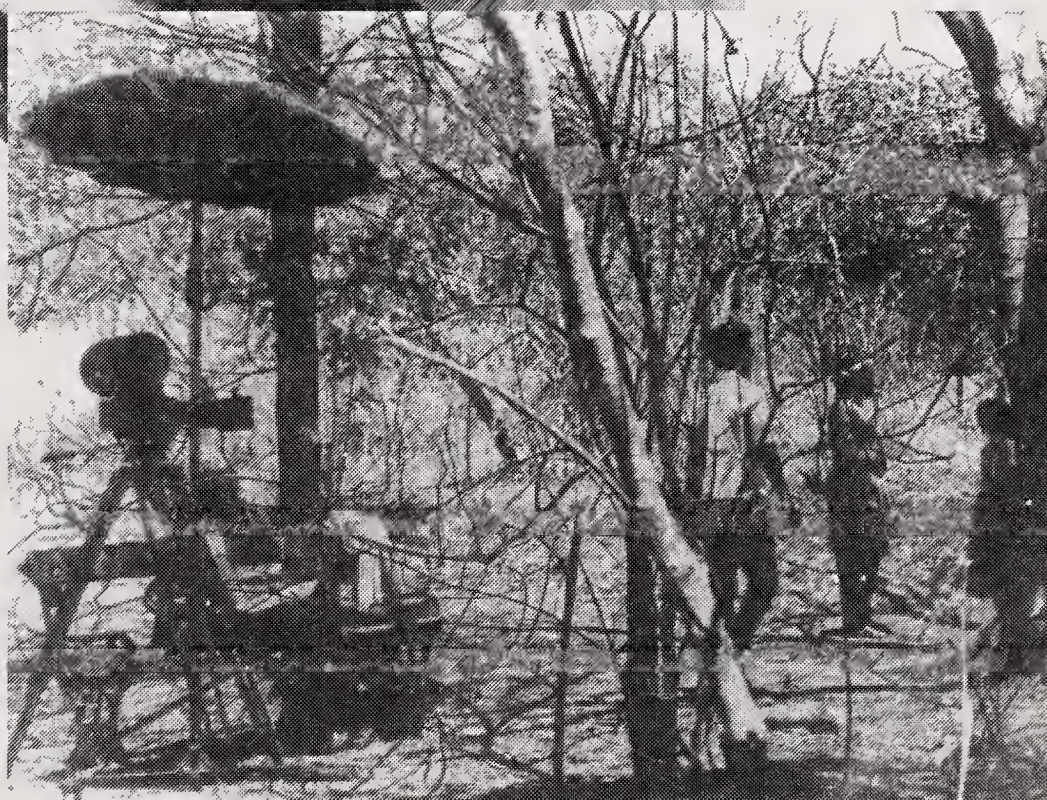
Saeed Akhtar Mirza : ardent advocate of offbeat cinema



A.K. Bir : superb cinematography and soulful themes are the hallmarks of his films



Film and Television Institute of india
(FTII), Pune (top);
Students learning the tricks of the
trade in FTII (center);
Students shooting in FTII ,Pune;
Filmmakers of the future





A scene from *Sardar* directed by Ketan Mehta



A scene from *Bhootakkannady* (Malayalam) directed by A.K. Lohithadas

XXVII. Future of Offbeat Cinema

“What will not change would probably be the experience of sitting inside a darkened hall as a community and emoting and enjoying the larger-than-life size images and sounds overwhelming you.”

—Adoor Gopalakrishnan

Offbeat films are no longer a sensation that they were in the early 1970s when a ‘wave’ rose in Hindi, Bengali and Malayalam cinemas. It gradually wore off, as their quality deteriorated. Satiety about cinema also came about following an excessive diet on fast-breeding television and video. In the 1980s, only the very rich and upper middle class families owned video cassette-players but now DVD and VCD players have become ubiquitous; now almost everyone can afford to possess or hire them. Video parlours, shops for lending and selling pirated VCDs have sprung up everywhere, dealing mostly with mainstream, B-grade, soft-porn and even ‘blue’, films. People in south who refuse to speak and learn Hindi, crave Hindi blockbusters; Hindi cinema has become virtually national cinema. In a consumerist society, entertainment has become the craze of the middle-class, which has been the patron of the cinema since it began.

In such a scenario, what is the future of India’s offbeat cinema? Linked with this is the wider question: “What is the future of cinema itself?” Revolutionary technological changes from the second half of the 20th century have outdated many other mass media but not the cinema. Magnetic audio cassette outdated gramophone records in the 1950s and was itself antiquated, a few years later, by the (audio) Compact Disc. Much sooner Digital Video Disks (DVD) and Video Compact Disc (VCD) have nearly replaced Video Cassette Players and Recorders.

Changes in cinema have occurred both in the software, i.e. in its content and hardware, i.e., in technologies of making, copying and exhibiting them. Celluloid negative has been replaced by magnetic video tape and polyester negative and recently, by digital cinematography. Advances in information technology are affecting filmmaking all over the world. Computer-generated images and even actors have become a reality; special effects in Hollywood productions like *Jurassic Park* and *Titanic* were overwhelming. British Telecom is planning to transmit, electronically, feature films to cinema halls, to replace the present practice of making expensive prints. In near future, films can be digitally transferred to databases for encryption and then transmitted by satellite and receiving dish antenna to a television set but the problem with new technologies is that they change too fast. As P K Nair, former curator of National Film Archives says, “Before you get familiar with pluses and minuses of the latest equipment, the next models are out in the market.”

Tomorrow's Technology: Digital Cinema

Hope for the survival and growth of the offbeat cinema lies in the development of new technologies, like digital cinematography and digital projection. In a Digital Film Festival, held in New Delhi in March 2001, in which some 40 Indian and foreign digital films were screened, speakers outlined its advantages over conventional filmmaking. The Chief Executive Officer, Ms. Pia Singh of the organising company, 'Digital Talkies' said,

"It is a much cheaper medium. You can buy a digital camera for two lakh rupees and an editing station for six to seven lakh rupees. Traditional cameras are upwards of 20 lakh rupees with editing stations for at least 50 lakh rupees. ..Digital technology will create a whole new kind of filmmaking. Some people are saying that in 6-7 years, there will be no celluloid theatres left...When there is full broadband connectivity, you could be beaming signals from the studio directly into the theatres, though it may not happen in 2-3 years."

Director Shekhar Kapoor, a partner of the company, believes, the new technology will suit offbeat filmmakers. Being cheap and flexible, it will give them full freedom in making and altering their films and cut out the producer or financier completely and render filmmaking much simpler.

"You can do a movie, using an inexpensive digital camera, feed it into a computer through a low-cost interface, edit it, voice it, play around with it and when you are happy, upload it on to the Net for it to be watched by, literally millions. You can do this, theoretically, without leaving your house."

Digitally-made films can have certain limitations. They may be grainy in texture and it may take long, in view of India's existing bandwidth, to stream films on the video on the web. Digital projection to theatres will have to be confined to urban areas. There will not be much of security, as hackers may watch a new movie on their computers on the opening night itself. So will be standardisation, as copies could be made with different versions. The technology of satellite transmission of digitised images has to be developed. If studios send DVDs to each theatre, they could be pirated, unless water-marked. Currently, there only a few dozen digital movie projectors in the world; therefore, a digital movie revolution is still far away.

Future Software

Howsoever revolutionary the new technologies may be, they will pose no threat to the soul of cinema; in fact, India's mainstream cinema has begun to use some of them, despite limited budget. The digitisation of cinematography will improve both the genres but offbeat filmmakers, being more cinematic, will use it more creatively. Adoor Gopalakrishnan thinks that offbeat filmmakers should not stay away from them; on the contrary, they can use them to enrich their films in form and content. He told this author on 30th January 2001:

“Dramatic advances in information technology have affected cinema too; this should not frighten the filmmaker. ...To simply cope with what is happening around us, we need to continually be adapting and reshaping ourselves. If advances continue at this pace, celluloid will in the very near future be replaced by either video, or DVD.”

Changes in cinema have been phenomenal in its content too. In every filmmaking country- more so in India- the mainstream cinema, chameleon-like, changes colour, all the time, as do the viewers' tastes. The offbeat cinema is not much a victim of these vagaries of popular tastes, because they address much deeper issues than ephemeral fashions in cinema. The themes of India's offbeat cinema have not changed much in the last 50 years; basic concerns, like poverty, exploitation, ill treatment of women, misalliances for various reasons return in new releases, leaving a *déjà vu* element.

Whether offbeat cinema will become more cinematic in the 21st century, or diminish, is not certain. Much will depend on the imagination and integrity of the third and next generations of offbeat filmmakers. It remains to be seen, whether they will persist making such films by swimming against the current, or eventually be swept away, like some of their compatriots of the second generation. As the NFDC says, it has not reduced its budget in sponsoring and producing offbeat films but their makers are defecting to the mainstream and quality was falling.

In over 100 years, Indian cinema has become the world's biggest entertainment industry; no other kindred industry- music, theatre, TV or video- is anywhere near it. The capital investment including on the infrastructure of distribution and exhibition is well above 4000 crore (40,000 million) rupees; black money component is over and above it, of which no correct estimate is possible. *Pather Panchali* cost Satyajit Ray and the West Bengal government some two lakh rupees in early 1950s; this will not suffice to pay taxi-hire bill for shooting an ordinary Hindi film, these days. Out of over 800 feature films, certified and released in a year, about one-fifth succeeds in box-office; four-fifths flop or make even. Nearly three per cent of these are offbeat.

The main problem facing offbeat filmmakers is that of financing and exhibition outlets. Except a handful of private financiers and producers, like R D Bansal in Kolkata, K. Ravindranathan Nair of General Pictures in Thiruvananthapuram (who produced most of G Aravindan's films), or Suresh Jindal (who produced Ray's *Shatranj ke Khiladi*), private finance has been generally shy for offbeat films. If the FFC and its successor, NFDC did not come on the scene and the first Chairman of the FFC, B K Karanjia (1969-1976) were not so liberal with loans, grants and subsidies to penurious filmmakers, many renowned offbeat films would not have been made.

Unlike a novel, a story, or a poem, a film's reception is known in a few hours after its release. A filmmaker cannot live on a pious hope, like that of the Sanskrit playwright, Bhababhuti that “time is eternal and the earth is large; somewhere, someday, somebody will like his work”. The investment in its production- often not his- has to be recouped, even without profit, as so many people's livelihood depends on its box-office success.

Most offbeat films, being low budget, recover their investment after a six-week run in a modest chain.

The then Minister of Information & Broadcasting, Susma Swaraj announced in early 2001 that the central government is contemplating to accord industry status to cinema, which would enable producers seek bank and institutional loan. Off and on, in the past also, the government made such promises but bank loans are still elusive for producers and directors. Even if banks advance loans to producers, the bulk of it will go to makers of mainstream films with good commercial prospects; offbeat filmmakers have little chance of receiving them, although box-office failures are the same in both the genres. Getting a distribution or exhibition channel is as much difficult for offbeat producers, as getting a producer for an offbeat filmmaker.

The problem of distribution and exhibition of offbeat films is linked with their making. If private finance does not remain shy, distributors and exhibitors will not hesitate to take these films. Mrinal Sen has been pleading for years to treat offbeat films as a minority cinema and build separate small theatres for screening them on commercial basis. To this end, the NFDC launched a theatre- financing scheme to create additional seating capacity and outlets for good films. On its own admission, the scheme has “virtually come to a standstill”, as there are very few applications from private builders.

Following rise in entertainment tax in many States and escalating cost of filmmaking—minimum 20-25 *lakh* rupees as against 2-3 *lakh* rupees in the mid-1950s (*Pather Panchali* cost Ray and the West Bengal government some two *lakh* rupees but it earned tens of *crores*), cinema tickets have become costlier. In a city hall, a comfortable seat costs at least 20 rupees, as against 2-3 rupees in the 1960s. Fast spread of films in video cassettes and compact disks, even in remote rural areas, eroded the viability of cinema-halls. Because of increasing stress of modern life and difficulties of earning livelihood, most cinema-goers prefer light entertaining films to generally serious or morbid offbeat- the so-called art- films.

Early in the 21st century, the future of India’s offbeat cinema does not seem brighter than in the 20th. In Kolkata where many great and good offbeat films have been, and are still, made, ordinary Bengali films are now made with an eye to rural and lumpen viewers. Young votaries of the offbeat genre continue to tread the uphill path but cannot change popular taste. *The Guardian*’s celebrated film critic, in the late 1990s, Derek Malcolm painted a bleak future of India’s offbeat genre.

“In another ten years, you might find that there won’t be 600 to 700 films made every year; only 200 to 300. And then it will go down from there...People like Ray wouldn’t be going into film at all...There’s a lot to criticize in India and to make a film which says, how wonderful India is would be clearly boring.”

Offbeat filmmakers have expressed a variety of views on this decline in interest of offbeat films.. Mrinal Sen wanted the ‘New Cinema’ to be ‘fresh, unconventional, dissenting, and iconoclastic’ and even announced a programme:

“Talking about the cold indifference of the general audience towards the glamour-free low-budget films, I accept the reality and suggest that, to start with, and till we are able to have a hold on the outer audience...we should bank on the minority spectators scattered all over the country.”

Shyam Benegal thinks, “Like any new wave, this one lost its freshness and became formulaic”. The Central and State Governments, in spite of strident political and anti-Establishment cinema, have not stopped short of producing or sponsoring them. The West Bengal Government, enthused by the income in foreign exchange by *Pather Panchali*, produced a whole lot of films, many of which ran into losses, or could not be released. However, frontline directors, like Ketan Mehta, Prakash Jha, Govind Nihalani and even Shyam Benegal went for mainstream matinee idols and wove in entertainment values to lace their offbeat themes with weak justification for commerce. Many offbeat films, e.g. Saeed Mirza’s *Naseem* (1996), Benegal’s *Mammo* (1995) and *Sardari Begum* (1997), Mani Kaul’s *Idiot* (1992), Kumar Shahani’s *Char Adhyay*, Gautam Ghosh’s *Patang* (1993) and *Gudia* (1997), M S Sathyu’s *Gallige* (1995) and Nihalani’s *Hazaar Chaurasi ka Maa* (1997) lay in cans for a long time, as no distributor and exhibitor offered to buy or screen them.

For the first time, national film awards for 1990 went to three mainstream films- *Agnipath*, *Karthavyam* and *Ghayal*; in justification, the Chairperson of the jury, Ashok Kumar said,

“Art cinema, predominated as it is by philosophy, psychology and intense subtleties, is rarely understood by the people. Communication is of prime importance in cinema. So we decided to take those pictures which quickly communicate.”

Prakash Jha, whose two latest films- *Mrityudand* (1996) and *Gangajal* (2003)-embraced features of the mainstream, e.g. in casting mainstream stars, justifies his deviation. He says, his aim is to “draw the half-serious viewer into the theatre and entertain him with films that are more serious in intent and content”.

Girish Kasaravalli of Kannada offbeat believes,

“In the 1970s, people had a lot of serious things like art, films, theatre and literature to discuss. Today, the priorities have changed, because people are finding it difficult to make both ends meet and there’s a general tendency to go for light, casual stuff... Parallel cinema in the old sense cannot survive. The economy, as a whole, has gone past the stage of subsidising culture. And even in the years of Shyam Benegal, art cinema made no inroads in establishing its own exhibition network that later generations could use and benefit from.”

Shaji N Karun, Aravindan’s cinematographer who turned a celebrated director of award-winning *Piravi* and *Vanaprastham*, is optimistic. He believes, “Time will change and art films will definitely reach people.”

This author believes, the decline of interest in offbeat films is due to gradual

lumpenisation of cinema's viewers since the Second World War. Instead of the middle-class which formed the bulk of viewers and makers of films till the 1970s, fly-by-night producers are investing in films with an eye to the rural illiterate and the urban lumpen classes who, not having access to DVD, VCD and VCR, flock to cinema-halls to see entertaining and B-grade films to forget their worries for a while.

Only Adoor Gopalakrishnan whose films Ray liked best among offbeat films does not think, offbeat films are in any crisis. On the contrary, he sees a good future for offbeat cinema, as he told this author on 30 January 2001:

"More and more people are seeing these films, on the [TV] channels, if not in the cinema-house. Of course, making them is difficult as in the beginning, particularly finding producers or financiers. I see a movement even when a few filmmakers continue to do what they believe in ...when they do not succumb to the market pressures and the formula of high-profit cinema."

India has some 13 thousand cinema-halls but not one of them exclusively shows offbeat films. In Delhi's Trade Fair Grounds in Pragati Maidan, three mini-theatres used to show them and foreign classics in mid-1990s; now they present a mixed fare. During festivals, a lot of Indian and foreign serious films are shown, which are generally seen by film buffs. A Mumbai theatre used to show only new offbeat films, where *Bhuban Shome*, *Ankur* and *Bhumika* were premiered. Its owner, Siddheswar Dayal no longer does so for sheer economics. He says, "How can a theatre run *Bhuban Shome* and *Sholay* at the same costs and expect to get similar returns?"

The new generation that has entered the offbeat genre in India or abroad from the 1990s is upbeat about information technology and liberalised economy. Filmmakers like Pamela Rooks, Dev Benegal, Nagesh Kukunoor and Shekhar Kammula do not carry the baggage of history and tradition, like the previous two generations. As Dev Benegal says,


"The next generation of filmmakers....does not have ideological baggage....There is a new audience, a new India and they are looking at new movies and want new movies."

Right from the Silent Era (1912-1934), there has always been a distinct genre, neither pretending to art nor catering inane entertaining for the sake of it. They steer clear of the excesses of the mainstream and offbeat cinema, tell engaging stories and cut across social strata in viewership. This is the the core of India's good cinema, given the label of the 'middle cinema' by the media. There is some truth in the cynical remark of William Friedkin, the director of *Exorcist*, 1973:

"If the film is liked by the audience and the critic, it is a great film. If it is liked only by the audience, it is a greater film. If it is liked only by the critics, it is a piece of shit."

The hope for a better cinema lies in the spread of literacy and rising discrimination

of viewers; Kerala has proved this. The raazmatazz and mindless entertainment of mainstream cinema will, one day, become stale. Then the offbeat cinema will return to its glory of the 1970s. Till that time, its makers will have to hone their skills in new technologies to forge in the smithy of their souls 'the uncreated conscience of the race', because no other genre of Indian cinema can truly reflect it.



Cinema came to India from France on 7th July 1896, when six silent film strips, made by Lumiere brothers, were shown in Mumbai's Watson Hotel. Three years later, a Marathi still photographer, H.S. Bhatwadekar shot India's first movie strip in Kamla Nehru Park in Mumbai. Fourteen years after that, in 1913, D. G. Phalke made the first Indian feature film, Raja Harishchandra. The Indian cinema became the world's largest in volume, overtaking Japan in 1971. Some 900 feature films are added every year, bringing the total to nearly 33,000 at the end of 2003.

Since Satyajit Ray compelled the world's attention to the Indian cinema through his debut, Pather Panchali in 1955, a new genre has been added, called variously as auteur, art parallel, minority, offbeat etc: Ray himself preferred the term offbeat. In this chronicle, the author presents an uptodate bird's eye view of the genre and holds that in its totality, it reflects the 'conscience of the race'.

Born in West Bengal in 1940, the author studied English literature and joined the Indian Information Service. He worked in various Media Units before retiring as Registrar of Newspapers for India. An avid filmgoer since boyhood, Shri Ray has written extensively on good cinema in various newspapers and journals, including *Sight & Sound*. London, Dictionary of Film & Film-Makers, Chicago.

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